LORE OF CONQUEST THE LAST ARGUMENT OF KINGS COLLECTION

INTRODUCTION LORE AND COSMOGONY

Introduction: More than six centuries have passed since the Fall changed Eä. Humanity struggles to rebuild after that cataclysm and the Long Winter that followed. With the Hollow Throne empty, the Hundred Kingdoms remain embroiled in internecine warfare, as the Nobility covets the remnants of the Empire, while the Church grinds its teeth at the weakened Orders. The City States of the south struggle to recover from the collapse of their paradigms at the hands of demagogues and tyrants. To the north, the Nords have finally left behind the horrors of the Fimbulwinter and the rule of the Jotnar, and have started expanding from their shattered realms. They turn their covetous eyes to the rich lands of the south, lusting for revenge for their murdered gods.

With mankind far from the glory and might of its Old Dominion, the enigmatic Spires exert their power for the first time in eons. Shedding millennia of custom and practice, the merchant princes seek the wealth of the lesser races, in an effort to break the stranglehold of power the Directorate and the Sovereign House exert. As the vicious games of these elders spill into the mortal realm, misery and warfare spread like a disease from their domains.

While the clamor of war spreads, the wisest amongst those living fear the rising of the Dweghom. Deep in their Holds, they hear the clamor of battle approaching and feel the pulse quicken in their veins. They are the eldest disciples of War. The last time their Hosts marched to battle, the eternal reign of Dragons came to an end in a conflict so violent the land itself withdrew.

Far to the east, darkness is gathering. The fearless Tribes hurl themselves against the Claustrine Gates as their lands shrink. Their warbands are unable to contend with the ancient evil that stirs in what was once the heartland of the Old Dominion…

1. GENESIS

Genesis: *While the points of view and flavor differ, we continue to find the same repeating factors in all Genesis mythologies: a force of Creation and a force of Destruction held in check by a third force, one of Balance, usually presented as the ideal. In all my research, I have yet to encounter a single religion or syncretic system of belief that deviated from the same pattern and indeed, one could piece together the same cosmogony tale from teachings of distant or even opposing religions.*

– Sophides, “Rational Faith”, 482 P.R.

“Before the Breaking, One was All and All was at peace, for the purpose is One. Thus was in the beginning and so will the end be, all Dei, all ideas, all perceptions, all states of existence. So in the endless prospects of One, its own absence was perceived and the concept of None was born. So now One had become Two, one that Makes and one that Takes, one that Creates and one

that Destroys. And they both were flawed in their vision and execution for no Part can perceive All.

Of the Two, the Creator, who was the memory of One, wished to remake it, yet it destroyed it further with each creation. The Destroyer would try to achieve None, for it was born from its perception. And yet its works led towards All being One once more. And the two were locked in eternal struggle, within themselves and with each other, creating and destroying for ages immeasurable until the illumination of the Third, who shows that all can exist within the One."

– From the teachings of Incaladrus,
recognized Father Aspect Incarnate of the Deists, circa 348 P.R.

"And the Mismatched Twins fought for eons, blindly creating and destroying realities that Theos never intended to exist, where Passions ruled, and Sin was spread in all of their dimensions. This lasted for uncounted eternities, before Theos, Father of All, was finally angered and his anger poured into the Mismatched. It was Theos' anger that made Creation, weaker a warrior, finally wound Destruction. And it was Theos' anger that finally allowed Destruction, ever stronger but never strong enough, to return the blow and shatter his Twin. And the Lord heard one's wailings and saw the other shattered, and his Mercy was made manifest.

Creation remained shattered, subduing to its rightful Ruler's will. But Destruction saw weakness in Mercy and did not see the Will behind it. And he mocked and challenged Theos. This futile blasphemy enraged the Almighty. Then the Lord's Mercy and the Lord's Anger came together and his Justice shone radiant and burned brightly all over creation. Our Lord fell upon Destruction and cursed him for eternity and called him Belzul, the Accursed and made him kneel before smiting him and strangled him forever, bringing him pain eternal."

– Nova Fides: Principium 3:8-18,
Holy Book of the Theist Church

"Lie with me" said she and took her brother in her arms and with words he liked he put his mind to slumber. And when his black eyes closed, Nen struck. Slowly she strengthened her embrace at first, fearful of waking him. But as Antuk fell deeper and deeper into slumber, firmer and firmer her hold would become, then harsher, then strangling, building layers upon layers of stone and metal shackling her sibling. All her might it took even though still he slumbered, but in the end, her first creation formed. Ne'nea, is her name, the Womb, that will give birth to destruction at the end of Time, but in the tongues of men they call her Eä. The Prison some say it means, the Field say others, while others still say Home, for the tongues of Men are many.

And yet Nen's task was still not over. From her place in the darkness of the Well, she looked around and saw the pieces of the Ever-Maker drawing closer, for he too is as eternal as his brother.

"Move" she then commanded, and from her word her first child, Ronu, the Dancer, Ever-Moving, was born. He rushed from her mouth and set upon the Blackness of the Well, laughing and

running, grabbing and shoving, making Kunte's pieces to dance and twirl, unable to unite till the end of his dance. Time, Men call him, and fear him as a Runner, but for his dance the cosmos would cease for all but the Spawn.

– The Tale of Coming, told by Shak'heer the Limbing,
passed down to him by Kush'zar the Eyeless and to him by Tzek'Hal
the Maimed and by all the Flawed before them, mouth to ear,
since the birth of the Neantali people, before the Old Dominion

2. HISTORY

Shards of the Primordials: From the highest heavens, down to the darkest pits where Destruction and his servants are bound, Primordial powers infuse the world of Eä. The most extreme of these manifestations are the Horsemen themselves, as Aspect Souls of Creation and Destruction. Bound and chained by the dragons, they nonetheless represent the most powerful primordial essences at play. But they are far from the only.

When Creation and Destruction fought at the dawn of existence, each blow stuck true and cast the essence of these two primordial powers throughout the Cosmos. The greatest of these are the stars themselves, raging shards of Creation cast into the heavens when Destruction smote its sibling with a blow so powerful that shattered its very body into a million, million pieces. Likewise, Creation's original blow, the one that incited Destruction to its rage, was a deep cut that has bled incessantly since it was made. The larger fragments, those that possess enough power and essence to retain consciousness, are powerful entities capable of extraordinary feats of primordial magic. They range in power from full-fledged gods and primordial dragons, down to the meanest daemon and cherubim in the Primordial Hosts.

Smaller motes of this primordial essence are just that, motes. They lack any motive energy or volition, wafting through the cosmos with no aim or reason. Thick physical barriers can impede their progress, resulting in a slow accretion of these motes within an area. The most common manifestation of this are the countless exotic stones and metals that one can find on Ea. It is no coincidence that the deeper one digs, the more of these minerals are found, as the powerful essence of Destruction suffuses the stone and molten lava. On the other hand, the essence of creation is much harder to come across in a solid form, diffused as it is through the cosmos. The likeliest sources are extraterrestrial objects such as meteors and space dust, which became infused eons ago.

Unlike solid matter, life retains an unusual capacity to trap these motes. In small concentrations they do little more than affect the mood or outlook of the lifeform. In higher concentrations though, they can start creating gross physical changes on the form of their host. Most of the creatures considered… normal by humans on Eä and name as animals (rabbits, deer, oxen,

wolves, etc.) are of a Balanced Aspect, and do not possess a high concentration of these motes. Humanity itself is considered to possess a balanced Aspect and as a result those creatures that are Aspected away from Balance, towards either Creation or Destruction, humans instinctively find unnatural and call monsters. Whatever the case, these motes seem to ignore the laws of physics as laid down by balance. They seem to respond to eddies and currents that have nothing to do with the physical realm, being drawn to areas and events that embody their chosen aspect most strongly. These motes can help Aspect an entire area, aligning it with their primordial paradigm. This is why a particularly famous battlefield might become the site of future battles for no discernible reason, or a particular building, once inhabited by a creative genius might become a midwife's home or nursing ward.

One of the more curious properties of these motes is not only that they are drawn to common areas, but that they possess the ability to merge when chance forces them together. In a powerful enough Aspected Locus, enough of these motes can come together to grant the amalgam a rudimentary instinct. These slivers will start seeking out smaller pieces to incorporate into their growing form. As more primordial power gathers, sentience slowly develops. These awakened primordial slivers are small manifestations of Creation and Destruction, which often settle within their locus.

All sentient races on Eä are familiar with these manifestations. The Dragons would let them be, until they reached a critical size after which point they would be hunted and destroyed. The Exiles, strangers to our world, have a very limited ability to interact with these sprites. The Spires view them with extreme caution, and through a long process of trial and error have learnt to catalogue them and use them on infused flesh to grant unique and abilities to their creations that could not have been achieved otherwise. The Weaver Courts, on the other hand, venerate these beings as manifestations of the will of Eä. The most devoted and insightful amongst the Summer and Winter Courts have found ways of using their Life-Binding abilities to merge with these existences, assuming their role of leaders and sorcerers amongst their kind. The Quiet venerate them and cherish them as by-products of Primodial Balance, but otherwise ignore them. The Dweghom, ever practical and focused on their martial pursuits, have taken a different track. Lacking the raw primordial might of their Dragon creators, the Tempered have long captured these beings to power the constructs the Dragons left behind, while the Ardent reduce and distil their physical forms into pigments and minerals that are incorporated into their armor and bodies to aid their martial prowess. Humanity on the other hand found a different use for these slivers: worship.

Time on Eä: It is not hard to understand why the Fall would be a defining event in almost all civilizations on Eä, more so human civilizations than others. While naturally the Hundred Kingdoms and the City States can track their very birth to this calamity, the Nords have readily adopted it, be it because of their lack of record keeping during the reign of the Jotnar or because of the limitations of their oral tradition, which largely disregards the accurate study of history and focuses more on deeds. In the Hundred Kingdoms, it would take some time for the

calendar to settle. The first effort to keep track of time would differ from one group of Old Dominion refugees to another, as they usually attempted to count days based on their own escape. As the groups started gathering on the shores of the Bitter Sea, however, the abbreviations A.R. (Ante Ruinam) and P.R. (Post Ruinam) would come to be used as a common reference point between everyone, signifying the years before or after the Fall respectively. Still, while this counting first appeared long before the Tellian Empire, it would take the first Emperor to establish it as a standard measure of time. It has since been referred to as the Imperial Calendar, when for the first time the abbreviations became official and used by the state in all provinces. In short, this is how the Emperor counted years.

The Theist Church agrees with the Imperial Calendar, however, it uses the abbreviations A.S. and P.S. (Ante/Post Sacrificium). The phrase “In the Year of Redemption” or “In the Year of Penance” followed by the current year is often used in correspondence and record keeping, a practice adopted by most of the nobility, especially in formal situations. Similarly, Deists have adopted the Imperial Calendar, however specific Aspect worshipers may use entirely different calendars based on the latest incarnations of an Aspect. These variations are too many, too limited in use and often too short lived to merit further exploration.

The Russ adopted the Imperial Calendar in their dealings with the other Kingdoms, but in their official records they refer to year 7 P.R. as year 0 Brez, or “Without” (it should perhaps be noted that the Russ consider that the Fall happened on 2 P.R. and the Imperial Calendar is wrong by 2 years). Most Russ nowadays do not know what the original phrase was. Some claim it implies “without Theos”, while others claim it means “without Sin”, “without pain” or “without struggle”.

The Imperial Calendar has twelve months, each with 30 days. These, however, do not compile a full year, for there are an extra twelve days. These do not belong to any month, but are simply referred to as the Goddays. While all the Kingdoms share this format, the names of the months of course differ, according to the language or dialect of a specific cultural group. In Tradespeak, however, the names of the months are the following (starting from the first of the year): Ianus, Febus, Maritus, Apuas, Mea, Jux, Jul, Avgustus, Settua, Ottus, Noctima, Decarpus. After Decarpus, the Goddays come, twelve in number but for every five years. In the so-called “Tall Years” the Goddays are thirteen and they are generally considered years of bad luck. The seven days of the week in the Kingdoms are, in Tradespeak, the following: Preda, Dueda, Welda, Terda, Freta, Godda, Sondus.

While local customs and different beliefs have different holidays, some days are recognized throughout the Kingdoms. Detida and Prima, the last and first days of a year, for instance, are always holidays. Every spring, usually during Maritus or Apuas, the Fall is commemorated in twelve days.

For the Paeneticum, these are the days spent in prayer by Theos’ Chosen, before His sacrifice. The first nine days are days of fasting and contemplation. On the tenth day, the Catena, He was chained to the materialistic world of Men, so that He could sacrifice Himself to save them. It is a day of mourning, when long processions march slowly from every chapel and church, carrying

their sacred relics for the world to see, accompanied by beautiful, sad music that echoes on the streets of every faithful city. The eleventh day, called Ruina, is a day of death and the faithful are not permitted to eat or drink anything but water and a simple, tasteless soup when the sun sets. Cemeteries fill on Ruina, as the people visit the graves of their departed and offer flowers, while a statue of wood is built on every temple's bell tower. On the stroke of midnight, under cheerful bells, the statues are lit and thrown on a field of flowers beneath, and the twelfth day, Nova, begins, the new day when the faithful escaped the Fall and offered humanity hope and a new beginning.

Folkloric tradition, adopted in part by the Deists, tells another tale, naming the days in echoes of the names of the old gods:

Draech, the day when the beasts of Eä cowered
Nabus, when empty was the seat of a seer
Duoda came, and two to none lowered
Ferus, and only barbarians now cheer

Dionus, no good luck can anyone save
Festos, the day when god's hammer starts forging
Cleon, when way a knight's broken shield gave
Hazlia, skies darken from the Allfather Falling

Vagerro is now worshipped, wonderers all
Nunc, soldiers and victims now everyone's peers
Ishamos, twos split in ones in heart-broken calls
Ninuah, mother's body, her children in tears
'till ash and cloud move, to a new morning clear.

Oh, ash and cloud move! Bring a new morning clear!

This song is sung by the Deist faithful and, instead of one, twelve statues of Aspects are built in a circle. While the forms and names of these may differ from tradition to tradition, the twelfth is always that of Ninuah, the Mother aspect. Counting down to midnight, the statues are set on fire one by one. Tradition says that unless all statues keep burning Ninuah is lit, it signifies a bad omen given by the Aspect whose statue's flames died out.

Heroica, the midsummer day, has ever been celebrated as Highsun, but it was thus named and established by the Tellian Empire as a day of memory to the fallen in combat, commemorated in many Kingdoms with tourneys and games. This holiday falls at the end of Jux and marks the longest day of the year. The Paeneticum also celebrates the same day as Sacrema, the day when Theos hears prayers clearer than ever.

In contrast to Heroica, the unexpected holiday of Iudica is a moving holiday with irregular intervals. This, however, is not a day of celebration. Iudica is a day of Judgement, when Theos' angry eye is turned on Eä, judging all sin harshly, no matter how small, as he is reminded of the

fall of His Herald. This event occurs when the sun's light seems to burn brighter, as if a pale shadow is lifted over it. The Iudica cannot be predicted save but on the very morning it is happening (and sometimes not even then but closer to noon). When observed, however, all activity stops. Windows are bared, roads are empty and people move not unless they have to. No matter what one's beliefs are, the Iudica, even if differently named and explained, is respected and feared. Even the City States hold this day as a bad omen and citizens are urged to stay indoors. If their Epestimons have explained the natural phenomenon, they have not shared their observations but endorse the tradition nonetheless. While the Imperial Calendar has pretty much been adopted by the Nords, when it comes to the counting of years before and after the Fall, the similarities on time-keeping end there. The Nords divide the year in two seasons, Winter and Summer, based on the movement of the sun. They further divide a year into four sub-seasons, as it were, or Spells: Howler and Longwhite usually come in Winter, one signified by the rise of the northern winds, the other by the fall of heavy snow. In the Summer, usually, come Runwater and Sail, the first signified by the partial melting of snows, the other announcing that the weather is good enough for raids to start. The Spells, however, are not stable and their coming is announced by High Gothi, shamans and ship captains, judging by the weather. It is not unheard of, and in fact more common than not, that any of the sub-seasons last for only a few weeks or are even completely skipped. This makes for an extremely flexible system, which can vary even between neighboring settlements. For more precision, the Nords count the weeks of a season, twenty six for Summer and twenty seven for Winter. Their week days are Manigur, Tiyrgur, Wudengur, Thorgur, Freygur, Einherdag and Sondag

Holidays are rare in the north and many seasonal celebrations have merged naturally with the commemoration of significant events. The Night of the Burning Tree is celebrated a few days before the end of the year, when a heavily decorated tree in the village square is set on fire to dispel the darkest and coldest night of the year. It is not hard to see how the memory of Yggdrasil is kept alive, turning one of the most tragic events in their history into a message of endurance, if not hope.

The liberation from the rule of the Jotnar and the coming of the Einherjar is commemorated along with coming of Runwater, usually a few weeks after the coming of Summer, if the weather is kind enough. From the day Summer starts until its announcement, the Valkyries, or women dressed as Valkyries where there are none, stand before the Great Hall of the settlement and ask loudly "Is it today? Are the chosen awake?" If silence is their response, they will howl sadly, banging their weapons together to awake the Einherjar. If Runwater has arrived, then the village elder will sound the village's horn. Soon, all horns in the village will sound, with the "Valkyries" joining in with happy warcries. The two weeks after are spend in preparation, feasting and work, with kids dressed as Einherjar playing pranks upon their elders. At the end of those weeks, aspiring youths will depart to join the Kapp-a-Görask, the proving grounds where their mettle will be proven and their future will be decided.

Highsun is the last common holiday of the Nords, celebrated during the biggest day of the year. While the day is filled with music, feasting and merriment, spouses of warriors that have joined the raids are expected to stand near the shores or the edge of the settlement, holding candles for their loved ones to find their way home. It is speculated that all Spires keep two calendars: One counting the years since their exodus to Eä, and another counting the days of operation of each Spire. Findings suggest that in some documents a third way of time keeping, this time backwards, may be used. All of the above, however, are mere theories, as the inscriptions of the Spirelords are yet to be fully deciphered and even the Merchant Princes never share information about their people and instead mimic the calendar of the humans they trade with. Since Dweghom memories are perfect and because of the art of Mnemancy, it could be argued that they do not actually **need** any kind of calendar, save for everyday use or as a quick reference point. In a way, that is true. When it comes to referring to the past, the Dweghom simply divide time in campaigns. The Dragon War is the first campaign, followed by the Memory Wars, then the Exile Campaign, etc. Anything before that is simply referred to as the Nedwegh, a time before the Dweghom, when accurate time keeping and recounting of events have neither meaning nor importance to the Dweghom, save for the insults suffered by their former masters. The Dheureghod, the memory of the descent to War's prison, stands alone in history, an event and time separate from anything else.

Perhaps another division one can discern in Dweghom timekeeping is the "Rule". Living lives distanced from seasons or any celestial observations, days, seasons and even years mean nothing to a Hold. Instead, time is divided into Rules, referring to a Hold's Raegh's rule or the absence of one. In human counting, a Rule could last for periods ranging from weeks to centuries. For the Dweghom, these lengths don't matter. The Raegh's name is sufficient, the rest is remembered. Further divisions are simple and practical, more than intentional time-keeping, in a Hold. A Rule's length, varying as it may be, is usually measured in Commands, meaning the rotation of same-ranking officers as supervisors of the next twelve duty rosters. Rosters, in turn, mean the assignment of twelve Duties to the soldiers, and each Duty is divided into twelve Watches.

When it comes to comparing to the human way of thinking, these divisions are not as alien, not unlikely because of some influence between the two races, possibly pre-Fall humans adopting Dweghom military habits. Much like in most human militaries, a Dweghom Watch is approximately two hours long. Since a Duty is twelve Watches, this means a similar twenty-four hour "day" for the Dweghom as well. The similarities end there, however, as the Dweghom divide everything in twelves. 1 Command ("month") has 12 Rosters ("weeks"), which has 12 Duties ("days"), which has 12 Watches ("hours" or rather two hours).

This, of course, presents a problem. Since different Holds have different Rules, Commands would be impossible to discern, so one could not communicate a specific point in time to Dweghom of another Hold. First, there is one thing that one must understand and that is that the Dweghom **do not care**. Time holds no meaning to them the way it does to humans. If

precise information has to be shared between Holds, the Mnemancers will make it happen. If two Holds meet and/or cooperate during a Campaign against a third party, the ups and downs of the sun are good enough to coordinate their timing of attacks, for instance. These are sufficient for Dweghom communication. For the rarest of exceptions when it is not, the Dweghom count back to the first Watch of the first Campaign, against the Dragons. It is the only stable point in time, as Watches have since run uninterrupted for every Hold, clan or even platoon and each Hold's involvement in a Campaign may have differed. In layman's terms, whatever the exact "common" date today for all Dweghom is, it's over a billion Watches, although it is possible that Duties, Rosters and Commands are also used in that regard, themselves running uninterrupted since.

The Weaver Courts: Far to the West of the Hundred Kingdoms, across the Cairngall Range to the north and the Bitter Sea to the south lies a primeval land, where the calls of exotic birds and the ceaseless rustle of leaves marks the edge of man's domain. Deep within these lands, known to its inhabitants as the Faerannn, the Weaver Courts, ancient cousins of the Spires, hold sway. Split into four seasonal Courts – Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter – these two great Exile nations could not be more different.

Where the Spires turned their back on their innate gift of Life Binding and perverted it into Biomancy, the Weavers revere it, using it to shape almost every aspect of their culture. Where the Spires look upon Eä as a sacrificial staging point for their successful return to their Homeworld, the Weavers look upon Eä as a divine gift and take their duty to nurture and protect it very seriously indeed.

Children of a lost world and inheritors of a riven society, the Exiles who left the Spires under protection of the Eldest Dragons chose to abandon everything they knew, everything they carried and walk upon Eä giving freely of those gifts they possessed in exchange for the chance to peacefully sample those gifts the planet shared with them.

Under the tutelage of the Dragons, perhaps the only beings more fascinated with life on Eä than they themselves were, the Exiles soon began to appreciate the complexity of the tapestry of life upon Ea. These Exiles soon took a new name, Weavers, to represent their new calling, taking upon themselves the onus to heal the damage they had caused to the planet with their arrival.

The main tool they used for this was their innate gift of Life Binding. Capable of binding the life force of two beings together, the Weavers quickly began to bond with the planet they sought to succor. Breaking an age old taboo, they soon started mingling their own essences with those of the local environment, taking upon themselves the traits of local flora and fauna while gifting them with some of their own awareness and sentience in return.

A physical description of a member of the Weaver courts is categorically impossible: each member of the Weaver Courts has embraced the gift of Life Binding, bonding with at least one other living being, changing irrevocably. One can walk past a beautiful Autumn Court maiden whose eyes are the gentle round brown orbs of a doe, whose hair is a riot of thorns and roses

yet walks upright upon the cloven hooves of a goat as she converses with the lean male of the Court of Spring whose long neck and upper body is covered in vibrant feathers and ends in a parrot's head but whose legs are covered in a fine fur but shaped in the talons of a raptor. Standing next to these one might witness an ancient of Autumn who has repeatedly bound with the same grove of trees, becoming a towering humanoid figure encased in moss, bark and forest detritus who speaks with a voice like a hundred breaking branches.

Even stranger, one might lay eyes on a member of one of the High Courts. These are the mystical and spiritual leaders of the Weaver Courts who have somehow managed use their Life Binding gift to bond with the elemental forces of Eä itself, manifesting flaming coronae of fire instead of hair, clothing forged of frost and snow or claws and scales formed from pure obsidian and other, even more exotic displays of power. Each Court is associated with an element it: Water for Spring, Fire for Summer, Water for Autumn and Air for Winter.

An unusually large amount of Summer and Winter Court members possess Elemental Bindings, a fact that often causes these two courts see themselves as more worthy than the Courts of Autumn and Spring; a common source of contention between them. It would not be wrong to consider each Court within Weaver society a small nation unto itself with its own culture, goals, social mores, and rulers. Competition amongst the Courts is fierce and it is not unknown to break into open warfare, particularly when members of the Higher Courts are involved.

Much like the seasons must come and go, the power and influence of each Court waxes and wanes over time. The Court of Spring has been ascendant for centuries, flush with the victory and achievement of repairing the damaged to the Faerann that was cause by the Fall, the Long Winter and even the Breaking. But times seem to be changing, centuries of ennui have dulled the luster of their achievements and the other Courts grow restless. Intrigues and plots are flying thick and heavy throughout the Courts and maneuvering has already begun to see which Court shall rise and what agenda they shall pursue…

The Old Dominion: A common misconception amongst modern historians and their students is that the title of Dominion refers to the Dominion of Man. It most certainly does not. The original inhabitants referred instead to the Dominion of Hazlia, the Pantokrator, God of Mankind. And with his Fall the Dominion ended – but did not die.

Far to the east of the Hundred Kingdoms, past the Claustrine Mountains and the desert wasteland beyond it, lie the heartlands of the old Dominion. Once a continent-spanning power, the legions of the old Dominion were powerful enough to threaten even the elder races of the Dweghom and the Spires into acquiescence, or at least a semblance of it.

Past the once teeming valleys and fertile plains of the Heartlands lie the river valleys upon which Capitas, the greatest city of humanity ever built, was founded. And it is here, amongst the ruins of the holiest of cities of man that the remnants of Hazlia fell.

Wounded unto death, but immortal and driven to a towering rage by the betrayal of his subjects, Hazlia was pushed beyond the limits of despair and rage. In his hubris he sought to end the Old Dominion but was foiled by the sacrifice of another member of the Pantheon: Ninuah, the Mother.

Denied, broken and driven well past the edge of madness, Hazlia reached out to whatever power could answer his desperate need to avenge himself and punish his betrayal… and one answered. Death, the third Incarnate Soul of Destruction, had been bound beyond the reach of any being, living or dead, but Hazlia now stood in the threshold of both and could hear his call. Bending all his divine might, Hazlia was able to carve his way into Death's prison as he Fell.

What happened within that forsaken realm is beyond the understanding of mortals and immortals alike but from the unholy fusion of those two polar Primordial elements an unholy amalgam was born: Undeath.

Animate but unalive, aware but un-souled, a new Primordial paradigm was born. Its rage-filled birth cry infused the thousands upon thousands of dead in Capitas and the Old Dominion beyond with a fraction of his essence granting them a ghastly unlife. The spiritual connection the deceased had with Hazlia made this transfer not just possible but remarkably easy. In fact, this birth cry was so powerful and uncontrollable that Hazlia poured too much of his essence into it, becoming little more than a single directive that lived within each of his undead creations: slay the living.

Almost no records of the butchery that followed exist outside of the most secret vaults of the Order of the Ashen Dawn. What little knowledge of this period exists is embedded into the dark myths and legends of the Rus, the last of mankind to flee the Old Dominion and cross the Claustrine Range to freedom. They alone, amongst all the remnants of mankind, were forced to face the untrammeled horror of Hazlia's rage and despair made manifest and their myths, legends and cultural outlook reflect this.

Through the selfless sacrifice of the Last Legion and the last remaining god of the Triumvirate, Cleon, Hazlia's horde was defeated but a primordial power as old and vast as a Horseman, even a corrupted one, cannot be defeated, merely contained.

And so it was that Hazlia's power and his Will were severed. What the legion did with his Will remains the single most closely guarded secret of mankind, but his power has raged unchecked for centuries in the heart of the Old Dominion. In the center of Capitas there is a gigantic pit from which blazes a miles-high beacon of unlight: a powerful beam of dark fire that casts as much shadow as it does light, shrouding the entire city in a hellish glow of dancing shadows. This is the unfettered and unbound essence of Hazlia, fallen god of mankind; it is a corruption unlike anything that ever came before it and it has sung its siren song for centuries, drawing the mad, the broken, the despairing and the power hungry to it like moths to a flame.

Over the centuries, hundreds, if not thousands, of mortals have answered the call. Of these only a mere handful have survived, and they are the Anointed: the Prophet, the Warlord, the Speaker, the Seer, the Howler, the Keeper, the Branded, the Whisperer, and the Broken. The first whisper of their names is starting to be heard in the lands of man, a whisper that will soon burgeon to become a storm…

Of Stars and the Night Menagerie: Long before Hazlia was molded into the Pantokrator or the Gods of Yggdrasil sheltered the mortals of Mannheim from the predations of the Jotnar, perhaps even before the Spires, Dweghom and lesser primordial Shards conceived humanity as anything but entertaining primates, humanity had pondered about its place in the cosmos. Lightning was feared, fire was worshipped, rain was venerated, and the Sun was adored for its light and warmth. But when the night was clear and the skies dark, the stars were looked upon with awe and wonder, igniting the fledgling race's imagination and inspiring tales that would endure for thousands of years. Animals, faces and personified powers slowly claimed a place in the night skies and before long the silent skies became as vibrant and full as the world around the first humans. Dominant among them, and consistently appearing in lore across the continent at all times of humanity's presence, are twelve constellations that follow that circle the world of Eä.

Many modern scholars debate that the true recognition and cataloguing of the celestial menagerie did not really take place until the First Tribe's evolution. The primary argument is that the Celestial Circle faithfully reflects the early Pantheon of the Old Dominion, with twelve signs mirroring the twelve primary deities of Hazlia's entourage. This argument however ignores the fact that Hazlia was ever ready to use well-established patterns and beliefs, repurposing them to his own designs. Much like the proverbial chicken and egg, it is impossible to tell if the Circle was conceived after the Pantheon or if the Pantheon was founded to reflect an observed pattern. In fact, plenty of evidence would suggest that the skies had been observed and the movement of celestial bodies understood long before the ascension of the Old Dominion. Many of the proto-tribes that Hazlia's faithful would come to conquer or assimilate had already placed their own gods in the designs of the night sky, while the consistency and repetition of similar observations can only attest to some distant but common heritage that was reshaped and reimagined as the torch of this knowledge was passed down the generations.

Regardless of the origin, the reality remains that the Celestial Circle (also known as the Night's Menagerie, the Twelve-of-Skies, the Zodiac Ring and other, similarly poetic names) appears in almost all human civilizations of the continent of Surtoris and Mannheim – and only them. The Dweghom show little interest in the observation of skies, save for navigation during Campaigns, while the Spires dismiss such patterns as superficialities of primates. Even the W'adrhŭn seem to place little interest in them, save for the practical ones that will be explored later, and although the Cult of Famine has many stories to tell about the stars, they do not place as much of an existential significance to them as humans do. For the humans, on the other hand, the

Night's Menagerie is a source of scientific inspiration, occult studies and superstitious beliefs alike.

It is, perhaps, not hard to understand why. There are three Primordial Aspects – Creation, Destruction and Balance – and four elements – Fire, Earth, Water and Air – and Twelve is the number to represent all possible combinations. In fact, simplified versions of the Zodiac's symbols are often employed by practitioners to symbolize an element and its aspect. Regardless, many modern scholars reject this correlation as fabricated, and indeed Astromancy is widely considered superstitious nonsense by most educated people, however not all agree with this assessment. With the guiding paradigm of "In the Heavens, as it is on Eä," Astromancy is by many considered a legitimate field of study, one that does not require the Gift and a myriad self-proclaimed Astromancers claim to be able to predict the future and unravel one's fate through their art, whispering into the ears of farmers and sovereigns alike, more often than the latter would ever care to publicly admit.

Such practices, of course, are readily dismissed by the Chapters themselves; true Astromancy, Chapter Mages claim, exists, it is true. It is the understanding of likely Primordial and Elemental influences, but it cannot in any way actually predict the future, as such distant, celestial influences can easily be overwhelmed by ones much more elusive and much closer to the person or historical time. If a newborn's soul is to be influenced in the first place, for instance, being born close to a centuries-old cemetery, amidst a raging lighting storm or simply while a violent murder or an embrace of true love is taking place nearby, such events are more likely to achieve said influence than the Menagerie Sign that happens to be dominant at the time. Thus, much like in the Art of Decks and card reading, while academically the Gift is not required to understand its theory, its practice both demands and only truly benefits those with a primeval understanding of such influences, one available only to those sensitive to them through the Gift. Most Chapters in fact do teach Astromancy as a supplementary course, with the Pool of Stillness being considered the best on the field, their teachings however focus on ensuring stable spellcasting despite Primordial influences, rather than on individuals or historical events.

The most common names of the signs, along with their Old Dominion, Nord and City States names, are as follows:

1. The (Fallen) Hammer

Malleus – Mjolnir or Thor-Dropped-It – Sfira. A Hammer falling or crushing on a cluster of stars. Sign of the Crafter, Creational Fire, Faith.

2. The (Rigged) Coins

Nummi – Mimir or Head-Floats-in-Well – Dhikefalos. Two heads mirroring, backs turned to each other. Sign of the Magi, Creational Earth, Science.

3. The (Idle) Scales

Squamae – Farmadr or Lost-Boatman – Aliefs. A set of balanced scales or a boat with open sail (inverted). Sign of the Seer/the Sage, Creational Water, Opinion.

4. The (Sky) Hunter

Venator – Veidimadr or Hunter-in-the-Sky – Kinighos A bowman in the air, string drawn, arrow notched. Sign of the Wanderer, Creational Air, Experience.

5. The (Sun's) Lion

Leon – Kǫttr or Cat-of-the-Heavens – Pteroforos. A regal winged feline, depicted with a crown or mane. Sign of The Ruler/The Bureaucrat, Balanced Fire, Intellect.

6. The (Embraced) Calf

Pastor – Kálfr or Calf-to-the-Market – Zõodhohos. A calf being lifted by two hands embracing it. Sign of the Mother, Creational Earth, Sense

7. The Guard(ing One)

Bellator – Valkyrie or Shieldmaiden – Aspidoforos. A figure clad in armor, shield before it. Sign of the Knight, Balanced Water, Reason.

8. The Eagle (Unchained)

Exemptus – Hræsvelgr or Breaker-of-Chains – Aetos. An Eagle flying away, breaking a chain on its legs. Sign of the Untamed, Balanced Air, Imagination.

9. The (Loving) Doves

Columbae – Hrafni or Kissing Crows – Peristeres. Two doves/birds, necks touching as if embracing. Sign of the Lover, Destructional Fire, Passion.

10. The Wheat (Field)

Pilla – Hveitiakr or Field-of-Wheat – Dhorifori. A field of Wheat or rows of Spears in the sky. Sign of the Soldier/the Everyman, Destructional Earth, Obligation.

11. The (Offered) Lamb

Hostia – Ogledi or Crying-Without-Name – Athoótis. A lamb, head placed on an altar. Sign of the Victim/the Innocent, Destructional Water, Sacrifice.

12. The (Dancing) Peacock

Pavo – Fjadrhamr or Cloak-of-Feathers – Taos. A Peacock's tail or a man dancing in a feathered cloak. Sign of the Fool/the Trickster, Destructional Air, Ego.

There are endless other constellations, outside of the Circle, that dominate the night skies of Eä, and which have ignited the imagination of nearly all its civilizations. Few remain as consistent or

as widely recognized, however, and their study would be more relevant within individual cultural premises. One, however, cannot talk of the skies over Eä without mentioning the Veil, the Wisps and the Gap.

It is a fact known to few save for actual astronomers, that Eä's sky has, in fact, two layers. One is formed by the distant stars; it is there where the constellations are formed. The other, called the Curtain or Veil, is much closer, formed by debris of the War of the Hosts; it is an extremely thin, spherical layer of fine primordial dust which covers the entirety of the planet. In daytime, the layer is practically invisible, although the proximity to Eä's sun would have been felt much more were it not for this layer. In nighttime, glimpses of this layer can be seen at random, as spots of the Veil momentarily glitter in the night sky, giving life to what is known as the Wisps, Will-o-Stars, Starflies or a host of other names. If tradition is to be believed, one can surmise that it is by condensing parts of that layer or gathering its biggest pieces, that Hazlia was able to build his Elysium over the world; which, in turn, would later cause the brunt of the destruction of the Fall and, where it not for the interference and sacrifice of Ninuah, would have annihilated all life on Eä. Still, Hazlia's interference and his subsequent Fall have left a Gap in that layer. It is this which causes the day of Iudica, when the sun's light seems to burn brighter. The Iudica cannot be predicted save but on the very morning it is happening (and sometimes not even then but closer to noon). When observed, however, all activity stops. Windows are barred, roads are emptied and people move not unless they have to. No matter what one's beliefs are, the Iudica, even if differently named and explained, is respected and feared. Even the City States hold this day as a bad omen and citizens are urged to stay indoors.

FACTION LORE COLLECTIONS

1. HUNDRED KINGDOMS

Introduction: Sheltered by the selfless sacrifices of the last Legion, the refugees that managed to escape the cataclysm of the Fall would survive the Long Winter that followed and, in time, prosper to found one of the largest and most diverse bastions of human civilization on Eä. Today, the Hundred Kingdoms extend from the sheltered Heartlands by the Bitter Sea, all the way to the lands of the Russ, which stretch against the Claustrine Mountains, before one descends into the corruption and darkness spawned by the Fall beyond them.

Despite the best efforts of the Orders, the spiritual successors to the legendary last Legion, the Hundred Kingdoms have been riven by war almost from the moment the first desperate refugees laid eyes on the Bitter Sea. Peace has only visited their lands twice: once, upon the return of the Orders from the Claustrine Wall at the onset of the Long Winter, and again during the rule of the Armatellum dynasty that managed to briefly unite the Hundred Kingdoms under one banner and found the Tellian Empire.

The tragic end of that dynasty saw the Empire plunged into chaos and brought the resurgence of the Hundred Kingdoms. Today, the Hollow Throne and a few key institutions are all that remain of the Empire while, year after year, would be Emperors and conquerors perpetuate the cycle of violence that make an Empire a quickly fading dream.

With Spires and Dweghom Holds scattered in their lands, pressured by the constant aggression of Nord raids and riven by centuries of internecine warfare, the Hundred Kingdoms are militarized to an unprecedented degree. The feudal system that underpinned the old society is buckling under the assault of an increasingly complex trade-based economy and an ever-increasing demand for manpower. A new class of professional soldier has risen, men and women who fight not for land or obligation but for simple gold. While these ‘men at arms’ are covering the demand for manpower across the Hundred Kingdoms, they also represent a significant destabilizing force. Power is starting to shift away from the traditional landowning aristocracy and into the hands of their rulers, who hold the rights of taxation and can use that coin to purchase the manpower they need to keep their recalcitrant vassals under control.
To this volatile mix, one must add the growing assertiveness of the Faith. Their extensive holdings, and alliances with the Nobility, are allowing them to circumvent the old covenants and field a military force through proxies. As long disused muscles are being flexed, the ancient animosity between faiths is coming to the fore, with the Theist and Deist dogmas marshaling their power and supporters, getting ready to take their arguments from the religious Councils and onto the battlefield.

Standing against this rising tide are the Orders, warriors without peer whose prowess verges on the supernatural, a mantle and burden inherited from the shattered Legion that birthed them. Bound by their common cause to protect mankind from a hostile world, the Orders are split along ideological lines on how best to do this. Ranging from the fanatical devotion of the Order of the Sword, to the calculated interventions of the Order of the Sealed Temple, the Orders are the strongest check to the rising power and aggression of the Church and the all-too numerous local rulers.

Allies in these efforts can be found among the remaining institutions of the Empire. In the desperate days that followed the collapse of the Tellian Empire, the Imperial Conclave deemed the accumulated wealth of the Imperial family too great to risk distributing amongst its members. Thus, the Office of the Imperial Chamberlain was founded, to manage the estate until a new Emperor could be elected. Though his direct power is limited, the Imperial Chamberlain holds tremendous influence among the Imperial institutions he funds and supports: the Mint and its Gilded Legion, the Collegia and the Imperial War Colleges, as well as the Imperial Courts, often the last hope of the common man to receive a just ruling. Despite the best, and often stubborn, efforts of the most influential of sovereigns, these institutions have retained a measure of autonomy and independence, providing a stabilizing factor among the claimants of the Hollow Throne in no small measure due to the terrifying efficacy of the Steel Legion, the only Imperial Legion that refused the call to disband following the death of the last Emperor.

As a result, the forces of the Hundred Kingdoms can display tremendous variety, from a staunchly traditional feudal levy, reinforced by men at arms hired by a sympathetic Church, to an eclectic mix of professional Imperial Legionnaires and feudal allies, stitched together by the Imperial Chamberlain and backed by the brutal pragmatism of the Order of the Crimson Tower.

Hundred Kingdoms History

Fate of the Legions, Adamantine and Stone: At the height of the Tellian Empire there were six legions that answered only to the Imperial Throne. Of these, only two survived the collapse of the Empire in any recognizable form: the Gilded Legion and the Steel Legion. The others ceased to exist as independent units this, however, did not mean that they disappeared entirely, that their influence is not still felt today or that their fate has not inspired, for better or worse, throughout the years.

The Adamantine Legion was the Imperial bodyguard, its legionnaires considered the Emperor's Own. With members handpicked for their skill, discipline and loyalty, majestically armored in full plate with covered faces, filigreed and gilded in adamant, they accompanied the Emperor and the Imperial Family everywhere. Their traditional weapon was a ceremonial great sword, although they were required to master smaller blades as well. The assassination of the Emperor was the deathblow to this legendary bodyguard, in both bodies and spirit. Over half of the, already undersized at the time, legion fell during the attack itself. The remainders, often the unlanded sons of powerful nobility, were recalled by their families during the frenzied political

maneuvering that followed the collapse of the Empire and the establishment of the Conclave. Be it by shame or fear, few refused and the order for the Legion to disband that followed was a mere formality. To their credit, all returned their gear, shy shadows that visited the armory under cover of night; once the pride of the Empire, the Adamantine Legion had been shrouded in shame. What is left today of this legendary bodyguard is a lingering sense of regret and failure that accompanies one as one walks through the fantastically armored mannequins of the Imperial armories.

While it was the first Legion to be officially disbanded, the Legion of Smoke is the one most remembered. The decree to disband became known as *De Clementia,* referring to the Legion's nickname of "the Emperor's Clemency", for any convict could request to be transferred to the Legion for ten years instead of serving their sentence for any crime short of treason. The more cynical would attribute a different meaning to the name. This was the dark hand of the Emperor, black souled villains who the Empire marked, used and discarded, deployed against those the Emperor did not want simply defeated; he wanted them destroyed. Despite the origin of its men, discipline within the ranks was legendary as were the punishments for misconducts and desertion. It is worth noting that dedicated historians have found some inconsistencies that simply do not fit the popular narrative. If the Legion was so dreadful and the criminals who populated it such villains, how was it such a fearsome force? Why are there so few actual records of deserters or their bounties? Why are there no records of retirement or no decommissioned equipment stored? More importantly, what happened to the marked legionnaires after the legion was dissolved? Shouldn't the release of thousands of hardened, trained murderers have made a mark even in the chaos that followed the assassination of the Emperor?

Fate of the Legion, Ash and Ardent: The Legion of Ash was perhaps the most unorthodox of Legions; they were the wandering trackers and slayers of all manner of monster and beast that beset the population of the Empire. In the early empire, the Emperor was forced to place bounties on the heads of those beasts and monsters that preyed on his population. At first, only well-trained groups would undertake such tasks, mostly hardened veterans and accomplished sell-swords, whose experience outweighed the passing of their prime. But as the fame of these individuals increased and the bounties grew in number, so did the mercenaries who flocked to earn them, thinking it a quick way to make fame and fortune. It soon became clear that rules and guidelines had to be established as these mercenaries would start ambushing each other rather than the monsters, while the truly proficient among them would demand higher bounties or turn to less… official contracts. Rather than establish a Bounty Hunters guild, the Emperor created a new Legion, dedicated to the task. The Legion of Ash kept institutionalized bounties as their reward structure rather than a steady wage, and demanded they organize in units to promote skill communication and transmission, while offering better and specialized training. While it was not the only group of bounty hunters, the Legion of Ash was by far the most populated and rewarding. After all, the largest employer of legal bounties was the

Emperor and they all but monopolized their fulfillment. This monopoly, however, would prove to be the Legion's downfall. With the collapse of the Empire, the financial demands of the dissolution itself as well as the limitations and supervision imposed on the Chamberlain's Office by the Conclave swiftly saw the imperial bounties discontinued. The Legion of Ash disbanded almost by default, with little to no protest by its members; an unprecedented number of swords for hire became available, almost overnight, adding to the chaos of the time. Without a doubt, many of the Legionnaires of Ash found their way to the ranks of those nobles that could afford them, while others would begin fulfilling bounty contracts of a less-than-savory nature. Still, the need for monster slaying never seized and if one were to scratch the surface of the Hunter Cadres, who knows what one might discover?

The Argent Legion was by far the largest force the Emperor could muster. It more accurately should have been described as the Argent Legion*s* but by keeping them as a single force he made it harder for his opponents to accurately measure his standing army. During the dissolution of the Empire, the decommissioning of so many soldiers was a delicate matter, as no lord of the realm wanted an Imperial army on his lands when its Legionnaires found out they were no longer employed. As a result, the decision was made to recall the Argent Legion and guarantee their full pay, ostensibly with the goal of dismissing them when they were gathered on the Klaean Fields of Argem. This matter was crucially decided before the establishment of the office of the Imperial Chamberlain.

What nobody had counted on was the sheer scope of the project. As the Legionnaires started pouring in, it quickly became evident that paying this many soldiers would be a daunting task in and of itself. As the weeks stretched into months, temporary structures were erected to house the Imperial bureaucrats who would pay the soldiers. As the months began piling upon each other and the Legion still streamed to Argem, the ranking officers ordered the temporary construction of barracks to house their soldiers, expanding into the slums that had surrounded the Fields for decades, and commissioned the digging of proper sanitation as latrines were simply no longer enough. Another complication resulted from the long-established payment terms for the Legions. As the rules stood, a Legion had to be active to receive full pay, and the Legionnaires refused to spend months waiting on half pay, so they continued their regular activities, training and recruiting throughout the process.

By the time the last legionnaire had been paid off, years had passed and the coffers of the members of the Conclave had been bled dry, a factor that no doubt damped the flames of aggression that could have torn the Empire asunder in those vulnerable years. Still, the fabled Argent Legion of the Empire was no more. Or was it? Drilled perfectionists and life-long soldiers, the Legion's officers would not spend their time idly during the years of waiting. Their training regimes would be revisited and refined during the endless drilling sessions, while theory and strategy would be discussed almost daily in the officer lounges. In time, the temporary residences and training fields of the Argent Legion would become the foundation of the War

Colleges, where the best soldiers and officers in the Hundred Kingdoms still receive their education to this day.

The Last to Stand Guard: Most of the events of the Fall and the Old Dominion are forgotten today, save perhaps by the most learned of scholars. Rumors from the last waves of refugees would in time become legends, myths and bardic tales. Perhaps the song that has endured most since ancient times is “The Last to Stand Guard”.

In a metaphor that captures the bravery and sacrifice of the Last Legion, “The Last to Stand Guard” praises their patron god as the last standing god of the Pantheon. The song names Cleon as the last refugee to arrive at the Gates of the Gap, appearing before the Gates long after even the last of the refugees had passed, with his weapons shattered and his armor rent, carrying the body of the goddess Ninuah in his arms. Alone, surrounded by the darkness of the Long Winter and the smoke and ash of the Fall, Cleon remained true to his role as warrior and protector. He kept fighting to safeguard the passage west for any who could be saved, battling maddened old gods, bloodthirsty worshipers who craved human flesh, and the rotting remnants of the Dominion. Drained, dying, Cleon asks to be given a warrior’s death at the hands of his own followers, naming them as the first Knights to follow the First. Many a Knight Errant of the Order of the Shield have been known to sing this song in their travels, reminding common folk that the Order still stands for the values of the Legion that birthed it.

In a variation especially popular among the Braeon Highlands, Cleon delivers the body of Ninuah to Akelus, a Kelton legionnaire. He is entrusted to carry it to her favored people, a metaphor for their descendants, who never forgot the protector of their forefathers and, in fact, still worship the Mother above all Aspects to this day. A separate song, “The Parting Gift”, reiterates this motif and expands on the Goddess’s role. It was her blessing that offered the waters of a vast lake, the Bounty, as her gift to her people and the answer to the whispers of a promised land the Keltonni druids spoke of. To make the Bounty, Ninuah passed on all her remaining strength, ensuring that the destruction of the Fall would be mitigated and that, even in the cold darkness of the Long Winter, her people would have shelter and fertile land. In time, her gift would turn sour and the Bounty would become the Bitter Sea, as its waters mixed with the salty tears of the survivors of the Dominion.

Many more songs explore the final deeds of these two gods and all of them speak of their sacrifice in the end. Considering their continuous efforts to counter Hazlia’s mad schemes, this is very possibly true. While the real fate of Ninuah and Cleon is obscured behind too thick a veil of myth and song, it is a testament to their success that, to this day, folk of the Hundred Kingdoms remember these two gods and their sacrifice, one way or another.

The Pantheon and the Aspects: Considering the mosaic of different tribes, cultures and even languages that were assimilated by the Old Dominion, one can begin to glimpse the herculean task that Hazlia undertook in the creation and shaping of the Pantheon. His success allowed him to establish himself as the leader of the Pantheon, wiping most other religions and practices

that did not worship him as the Allfather. By the time Hazlia decided to shape the Pantheon around him, his insight of the human psyche was immense. This is made evident very easily as the image of the Pantheon he helped forge persists to the present day, expressing humanity's desire to worship throughout the ages. Twelve were the Pantheon's main deities, each, however, with a retinue of lesser deities, demi-deities, angelic figures and servants, expressing more specific virtues of each deity's aspect, to ensure their control. Indeed, to this day, there is a direct correlation between the roles of Hazlia's Pantheon, for instance, and the Deist Aspects of the Hundred Kingdoms. Even the Theists, in their intricate tenants of their worship that hide behind the idea of a single deity, recognize and worship separately lesser expressions of Theos' Will, as well as Archangels and Saints that mirror these archetypes.

The Father/The Ruler

"Then I saw the first of lights and heard one of the seven speak with the voice of authority, 'I am come'. I looked, and behold, the brightest of the sun's gold rays crowning His head, a hammer in one hand, His other hand empty, waiting, Hazliah, Samash, Ra-Solificus, Eliah, the Lightbringer, the Son of Light, the Allfather, the Fountain of Creation."

– Book of Light, 2:25-27

The Mother

"…there is no known civilization, modern or ancient, living or extinct, that does not include the Aspect of the Mother in their worship. From Demtra, the old Heleton goddess, or Nen Ishtra, the Fertile Mother of the Neantalii, to Yin-sha, the seed of Yeenlong found even inside Yankuma, and Um'a, the first woman of the Khalifates, the Mother is not only worshiped but adored as a very important figure. Even the strictest of Epestimons of the City States, in their flat-out denial of any worship, have personified 'Sophia', the wisdom of knowledge, in avatars similar to that of Ninuah."

– Miklos Mulner, 'The Aspects'

The Knight

"My sword to you, Protus, warrior divine,
so that it is drawn for Your Glory.
My shield to you, Sabaus, celestial protector,
so that it guards through Your Grace.
My mind to you, Ninurtu, wisdom of war,
so that it follows in Your Virtue.
My death to you, Cleon, First of Knights,
my Gift for all of Yours.
Whether I live or die, I am Yours.

Holy, holy, holy, lord Knight, Glory to Your name,
Thy will be done."

– The Last Battle Prayer of Legion XII, Pertinax

The Seer

"The Seer, or the Bureaucrat in the modern form of the Aspect according to some Deists, was possibly the least celebrated deity of the Celestial Host and yet among the oldest archetypes known to mankind. For the ancient Pehkts, before being assimilated by the Dominion, the Aspect was the creator, the godchild Nabu-Astertis, roaming the night skies as the constellation known to them as the Boatman and to us as the Scales. All life, the Pehkts believed, is but the stories devised by the Skysailor. When astrology spread and the Dominion expanded, Nabu naturally followed as a deity of prophecy and knowledge, abandoning his boy incarnation and fusing with Orcos the Star Seer of the Seromians. It was only during the later days of the Dominion that he assumed the role that distanced him from everyday worship, as the judge of the departed, knowing, better than anyone, the secrets of all souls."

– Miklos Mulner, '"'The Aspects"

The Fool/The Trickster

"…of endless shifts, witty and cunning, a robber, a horse thief, a bringer of dreams, a watcher by night, a thief at the gates, one who was soon to show forth wonderful deeds among the gods and mortals, with names as many as the orange feathers in his hair, Bakkus, Stanumus, Liokundis, Dionos, Ermus, the tempter of odds, the trick of light, the laugh of God."

– Hymns, 6:12

The Crafter

"*But the Crafter is now a burden. It limits him as a ruler, it limits his range of perception. From his new position, he begins to see the laws of reality more clearly. So he visits Festus, a mortal smith. He promises him secrets in his craft that no one has ever heard before. In exchange, he is to live in solitude, deaf and mute to this mortal world. The mortal agrees. Festus becomes a living legend, playing a vital role in the technological peek the Dominion reached and, in time, the Crafter aspect shifts from Hazliah, who can now expand fully to the Father. Hazliah becomes the Allfather, a god thus far unnamed and unshaped. Under the faith of mortals, reality shifts: Hazliah is and has been the Father, the Ruler, King of Gods and Men. Festus is the Crafter. But hints remain that betray the truth.* "…the red fire of creation in his hair, forgehammer in one hand and pliers in the other, Festos, Svarogos, Volkanus, Hazmash, the one who makes, the forger of all crafts*." How different really is the imagery from the Father, with the "*sun's gold rays crowning His head, a hammer in one hand*"?*

– Forbidden Texts of the Paeneticum Library
Attributed to the Anathematic

The Magi

"Then from the presence of all the seven I saw an eighth light and heard its voices speak in unison, 'I am come'. I looked, and behold, clad in translucent robes, two bodies, backs united, the Lady, Kirke, Aurora, Zorya, Eccateh and the Lord, Hekas, Aratrus, Volos, Metatros, the masters of possibilities, the lord of skies and lady of earth, the artists of creation."

– Book of Light, 2:35-36

The Untamed

(The Beast and the Barbarian)

"Much like the Magi, the Untamed presented a dual manifestation, its visage a combination of man and beast. At first, those were possibly heavily influenced by the pagan tribes who worshiped animal gods in the Old Dominion but in time the two faces of the Untamed were split into what would become the Beast and the Barbarian. Today they are worshiped by and large separately, but the very existence of the Nords explains the Untamed's persistence in being remembered as a single entity, now and then. The difference of the two aspects lies in their place, of sorts, but their core remains the same: whether by nature or choice, the Untamed exists outside the established society of man.

The Beast is the Untamed Wild, the part of the world that can never be part of civilization. To this day, Deists often name wondering monsters as its manifestations. There is a tendency to perceive the Beast as evil but, as the Deist Questor of the Beast, Rolf Homkonsen, has written in his "Beast Within", it is not so, even in its most monstrous apparitions. Gugalann, the Chimaera with the Three Mouths: Hunger. Herna, the Antlered Bitch: Parenthood. Minos, the Bullman: Sexual drive. Satet, the Three-Eyed Serpent: Survival; they are instincts, primal urges, stripped from ulterior motives, neither evil nor good and yet the birthing power of both. The very lack of logical, human thought behind those, however, turns the Beast into a very frightening aspect indeed.

*The second manifestation is that of the Barbarian and, unlike the Beast's connection to the Wild, the Barbarian is very much human and often part of society. Both lawless and a lawbreaker, denying to conform to the mandates of civilization, it is really not that hard to understand why the Barbarian was conceived as an Aspect by Hazlia. '*Buudbhu, Hokar, Ferus, the wild, the lawless, the untouched, the place where all lights aim to reach" says the Book of Light. "*Where all lights aim to reach." What better way for an expanding religious state to convince its subjects to one conquest after the other, than a deity that exists with the sole purpose of being, eventually, conquered but being ever so elusive? Today, while the analogy of the Barbarian to*

the Nords is obvious and easy, the truth is that the Deists often name agitators, renegades and rebels as Aspects Manifest of the Barbarian."

– Sophides, "Rational Faith"

The Soldier

"Let Kings worship Rulers and heroes worship Knights! Let the Queens wear the mantles of Mother to disguise their ambition! Let hunters worship beasts and barbarians and let the mages worship twin heads! And while they do so, I ask: who was there in all the battles ever fought? Who fought with nature over crop fields at all times of peace and fought enemies over battlefields at all times of war? It was no King or Queen. It was no mage. It was no Knight. They only exist to revel in moments of history, not every day. It was you, people! The simple people, the true people! You have your own Aspect, your own protector! You who work tirelessly! You who fight endlessly! Remember the poet:'Who bears the greatest burden I wonder?The greatest king's head? A single crown it lies under.But who carries the scythe and who carries the spear?Who fought without choice yet also fought without fear?The weight of history always fell on one's shoulder.Hail thee, unsung hero! Hail thee, unknown soldier!' "

– Questor of the Soldier, Doan Johanson

The Lover

"Sometimes one must wonder on the nature of the heathens. Often has the Church been chastised for its denial to accept the so-called 'Lover' aspect as a Saint, claiming there are no examples of lovers in our prayers. They say we deny our faithful something natural. I say the quality of one's faith is measured by its teachings. What do they say? What do they worship? Amos was the Archer whose arrows started the War of Eleven Lilies in Galania, before the Empire, say the Galan Deists, bringing 'love' to youths of multiple feuding families. Eros, says an excommunicated poet, is the cause of misery that took the life of two blooming adolescents, by their own hands no less, in that play so loved by wistful youth of the nobility. Innadite was the temptress who offered another's wife to Pareon, igniting the Allerian campaigns. Further back in time, Isha, another Archer apparently, spread chaos among the clans of the Nean people, before salvation came by the Old Dominion. They say they preach love but all they really preach is war and chaos. They say such is our world but I say such is them".

– Brother Jeremia of Sankt Volto

The Wanderer

"Deists proclaim the Wanderer exists in every age. Ha! Fools. I have searched far and wide and in all my travels and all my exploits I have never encountered such an entity."

– Captain Reycom Maylnolds

The Victim

“Perhaps the most bizarre apparition of the divine in the Old Pantheon was the Victim. It never bore a name and its church was always small and disregarded by history as a non-factor. There is strong evidence that it endured the long centuries leading to Hazlia’s Fall, where, ironically, it was destroyed entirely as they never joined the refugees, but rather stayed to help those in need in Capitas; after all, they were many. Very few Deists remember this Aspect today and even fewer venerate it but the truth is that their charity work is unparalleled and their paradigm simple: Say a prayer for the fallen and remember their innocence.”

– Sophides, “Rational Faith”

Sub-Factions

Nobility: In the early days after the Fall, when each Kingdom was but a fortified settlement on the shores of the Bitter Sea, nobility was defined by the ability to enforce one’s claim to it. The arrival of the Orders simplified matters. No petty tyrant or bandit king could hope to challenge an opponent who was backed by the Orders’ Brethren. This quickly resulted in a consolidation of power amongst those noble houses that courted the support of the Orders. As the Long Winter ended and the population exploded, spreading to more distant lands, the limited manpower of the Orders saw this simple paradigm come to an end.

Freed from the shackles the Order had imposed on it, the influence of the Theist Church quickly grew, forming a symbiotic relationship with the nobility. The nobles funded and protected the Church, while the Church expounded on the Divine Rights of the nobility, filling the void left by the Orders in the ratification of nobility’s claims. Legitimacy was no longer determined by the acquiescence of the nobility to the wishes of the Orders, but a divinely granted mandate, regulated by the Theist Church. Still insufficiently manned, the Orders had to find new means of controlling nobility. After the disaster of the Red Years, they found the tool they sought in the nascent Tellian Empire.

The rise of the Tellian Empire, as well as the spread of the Deist Creed, put an end to this newfound freedom of the nobility. Nobles either bent the knee to the new Emperor or were replaced. Backed by the Orders and supported by the same Church doctrine, the Emperor seemed unassailable. But while many resented the governorship of a distant figure, few could argue that the nobility flourished under Armatellum rule and the stability it provided.

Today, with the Emperor gone and the Church and the Orders at each other’s throats, the nobility are a hereditary self-proven fact, ruling the Hundred Kingdoms almost unimpeded. They are broadly split into two groups: the Imperialists, who wish to see a new Emperor elected, and the Sovereigns, who wish to see an end to the very idea of Empire. Ironically, both of these factions see the future in the Imperial Conclave, a gathering of all of the potentates in the Hundred Kingdoms, called every four years to issue decrees with the authority of the Emperor.

Putting their differences aside, both groups have come together in the Conclave to muzzle the Orders, preventing them from intervening in their internal politics, curb the power of the Chamberlain and the remaining Imperial institutions, and limit the influence of the Church.

Free from the influence of a higher authority, the nobility have turned to their personal agendas with a vengeance. The very name of the Hundred Kingdoms is a result of the influence of the nobility. Their power games in the Conclave result in an almost daily re-drawing of the political map of the Tellian Empire, as inheritance, betrayal and marriage have become favored tools, with armed conquest reserved as the last argument of Kings.

The Orders: The Orders are the oldest and most powerful armed forces in the Hundred Kingdoms, created following the collapse of the only Legion that survived the Fall of the Old Dominion. The battles and sacrifices, that the Legion undertook to shield humanity from the nightmares of the Fall, took too heavy a toll on its surviving members and fragmented the Legion. The Orders today are direct descendants of the original diaspora, each Order seeking to do its best in protecting humanity from what it sees as the greatest threat.

Sometimes, this is through direct action, following in the more martial traditions of the Order of the Sword or the Order of the Crimson Tower. More often than not, it is through the tremendous influence the Order of the Sealed Temple and its vast wealth, backed by the subtle threat of military reprisal. They were the force behind the establishment of the Militia Act that severely curbed the power of the nobility, as well as the main reason the church has not been able to convince the Imperial Conclave to rescind the laws limiting their armed forces to bodyguard details. Looking further back, one can see their support in the very foundation of the Tellian Empire, the spread of the Deist Creed and establishment of the Guild system. Whether it is with an iron gauntlet or a velvet glove, the Orders' hand can be seen shaping the history of the Hundred Kingdoms at every turn.

Many argue this paternalistic attitude has caused more harm than good. They point at the destructive chaos of the Red Years, sparked by their premature attempts at unifying the Hundred Kingdoms, or the bloody riots that followed the summary execution of the beloved Arch-Bishop Nicholas during his Regency. Despite this, the Orders have long maintained a good relation with the common people of the Hundred Kingdoms who praise them as heroes and benefactors: the monumental sacrifice of the Order of the Sword in the Nord invasion, the selfless heroism of the Order of the Shield's Knights Errant and the tireless public works of the Brothers Mendicant of the Order of the Sealed Temple have long since swayed the hearts and minds of the common folk.

With the collapse of the Empire, the Orders lost much of their influence, as they were heavily invested in the office of the Emperor, at the expense of both the nobility and the Church. When these two pillars aligned against them, there was little the Orders could do without resorting to war. Learning from their past mistakes, the Orders took a long view and withdrew. Though their

influence might be a fraction of what it once was, their military might has not dimmed in the least, echoing the prowess of the legendary Legion that birthed them.

Imperial Remnants: With the death of Otto IV, the last Emperor, the fate of the Empire seemed sealed. The nobility used the Imperial Conclave, called by the Emperor himself, to muzzle the Orders, shackle the Church and dissolve the Legions. Without these bastions of imperial strength, nobody would have the power to challenge their claims. The Empire was doomed, never to threaten the rule of the nobles again… or so they thought. Reality was not so simple and the idea of the Empire proved much more resilient than its enemies counted on. As the situation spiraled out of control, the survival of the Empire came down to the fateful decision of the Steel Legion.

Ordered by the Imperial Conclave to disband, the Steel Legion simply refused. They pitched camp within the Klaean Fields of Argem and announced that the Empire's capital, and all of its visitors, were under their protection. Reluctant, or unable, to challenge the Legion individually, the noble Houses delayed in their response and calmer heads were able to prevail. The problem did not lie with the Empire, they argued, rather it lay with the role of the Emperor. In the absence of an Emperor what more could the nobility want from the current status quo? The answer, of course, was the Imperial Estate.

Every noble coveted the wealth and influence that came from the title of Emperor but, even more than coveting it, they feared it would fall into the hands of their opponents. Thus, in a uniquely inspired compromise, the seasoned political minds of the nobility that attended the Imperial Conclave struck upon an agreement that pleased no one but satisfied them all: the Imperial Estate would be managed by the Imperial Chamberlain until a new Emperor could be elected, whose integrity, and neutrality, would be guaranteed by the Steel Legion and the Imperial Conclave.

To this day, the Imperial Remnants continue to thrive, funded by the immense wealth of the Imperial Estate. The Chamberlain retains control over the Mint and its Gilded Legion, as well as the Collegia and the Imperial Courts. Even if the Imperial Conclave has stripped their ability to rule on high crimes among nobles, the Imperial Courts continue ruling on low cases, granting commoners a chance at a fair hearing, assuming they can petition their case.

The Chamberlain also retains the services of the Imperial Ranger Corps, to ensure the sanctity of the far-flung properties of the Emperor. Often lending their services out to loyal imperialist houses as they are needed, they also serve as the Chamberlain's eyes and ears to lands beyond his direct influence. In addition he has chartered the dreaded Steel Legion to defend the material interests of the Estate in view of noble aggression. This has made the Office of the Chamberlain the single biggest employer of the Steel Legion, even if they continue to supplement their income by taking on outside contracts, so long as those promote the interests of the Empire.

Lastly, it is the Chamberlain's duty to host and preside over the Imperial Conclave every four years, a gathering of the nobility and leaders of the Hundred Kingdoms, to discuss matters of State ranging from trade and border disputes to the election of a new Emperor. Although the Empire has endured over a hundred years without a candidate coming close to election, this is still a momentous event that sees the potentates from throughout the Kingdoms gather for a fortnight of debauchery, power politics and intrigue.

The Office of the Chamberlain quickly evolved from a proscribed managerial position to a powerful force in the daily reality of the Hundred Kingdoms. By exploiting smaller titles and estates once held by the Emperors to secure votes, it exerts significant influence on the Imperial Conclave, where its neutral position acts not only to protect the Imperial Institutions and Estate, but also as a foil against the more extreme elements which seek to undermine the Imperial legacy. When even these subtle methods prove inadequate, it can call upon the military might of the two greatest fighting forces in the Hundred Kingdoms, the two remaining Imperial Legions, as well as the Imperial Ranger Corps and the ingenuity of the Imperial War Colleges.

Faith: The issue of faith in the Hundred Kingdoms is intrinsically linked to the Fall. The eldest of the two faiths, commonly called the Theist Church, does not deny the Fall itself. Rather, it denies its significance. They argue that it was mankind itself that Fell, not the Divinity. The divinity was cast out from heaven for its failure to guide humanity on the path of righteousness. In their doctrine, the Fall is the literal and figurative punishment of man by God, the Theos. For our failures, He cast away mankind's greatest champion and has left us to languish without His guidance. The few believers that were spared from the Fall were Gods Chosen, and following them

is the last chance mankind has at redeeming itself. It is thus Humanity's duty to rectify this grievous state of affairs, to move away from its life of sin and decadence and follow the Chosen of the Theos back into the light. The Theist Church is one of high ritual and deep tradition, stretching all the way back to the original practices of the Old Dominion, before the pride of man corrupted it. They enjoy tremendous support from the nobility as their doctrine of the 'Chosen' has been graciously extended to the nobility through the divine right of kings.

The Deist Creed, on the other hand, argues that the Fall of the Divinity was due to Mankind and its flawed vision of Perfection. They argue that God is a perfect distillation of Man, rather than Man an imperfect copy of God, and that our limited perception of this Perfection twisted what was once whole and pure through need and prayer, warping it so badly it Fell. They argue that the only way for humanity to worship the divine is by choosing to worship those Aspects we each understand and embody the best. Thus, to come closer to divinity one needs not be born among the 'Chosen', but to embody those Aspects of the Divine as closely as possible.

Unlike the Theist Church, the Deist Creed is not a centralized religion, rather a religious movement, so forming a consensus on what exactly the Aspects are is a matter of heated theological debate. Their dogma of enlightenment and advancement through self-improvement

and hard work rather than abasement and obedience, has spread like wildfire among the downtrodden, who see in this philosophy a chance to rise beyond their limited means.

As a result, religious disputes have become an extension of social differences making confrontation all but inevitable. The power of the Faith was kept in check by the Emperor and the Orders but, with the collapse of the Empire, both churches have seen their influence grow in leaps and bounds. While still limited to fielding only their dreaded bodyguards, the fanatic Sicarii, by ancient Imperial decree, the time is soon coming when neither Order influence on the Imperial Conclave nor feudal resentment at armed forces other than their own will keep the churches from resolving their theological disputes on the field of battle.

Spotlight Articles

Homage: Far from the many roads leading in and out of Argem, at the edge of the Klaean Fields, the statue of a legionnaire marks the foothills of the Temuli hills. He stands bowing his head towards Argem, his armor marking him as one of the Adamantine Legion, yet he dons two long swords and lacks a helmet, things unheard of for the legendary Imperial bodyguards. Despite his exposed face, the monument remains unnamed, with a single question inscribed instead. Named "The Lost Legionnaire" by the warriors of the Steel Legion, the statue has inspired many a bard. Some recount the tale of a Legionnaire who, gifted on his retirement with an expensive wine by the Emperor himself, was poisoned in his stead. His vision clouded and his thoughts confused, the Legionnaire asked desperately strangers to help him reach the capital and warn the Emperor about his would-be poisoner. Others sing of a retired veteran who, upon news of Otto's assassination, lost his mind and roamed the countryside. Stricken by grief to the point of madness, he spent the rest of his days desperately asking passersby the question inscribed under the statue. Others still, claim it is Charles Armatellum himself, thus the two swords, who never died but travelled as far as he could, to find a place where they would answer that they know not of an Empire.

The Steel Legionnaires stay silent to these tales. They honor the Lost Legionnaire every year, on the 15th day of Maritus, the day the Legions were disbanded and first day of the Klaean Trials. A single wreath is offered, as well as *halosis,* the flower of the Emperor's seal. Cadets are made to offer their longswords, a reminder that the Steel took the traditional great sword of the Adamant Legion to symbolize their determination to protect all that the Empire represented. To the Steel Legion, there is no one man and no one tale around the Lost Legionnaire; there is only a truth. The Throne may remain Hollow and the other Legions may have been forced to disband, but to this day, when asked where the seat of the Empire lies, the Legionnaires of Steel motion much like the monument, to their own chests.

Dawn and Dusk: "Every dawn and every dusk you make them suit up, stand still, stare ahead and listen to their officers give the same reports. Reports, I might add, that are on your desk

anyway". She sighed to emphasize the tediousness of it all. Because it *was* tedious. By the Aspects, it was almost as tedious as her early training chores. They were supposed to instill humility, self-control and, she suspected, obedience. She could not be sure, however. She never really learned that last part very well. Or had she? She realized she had kept her voice low, so as for the troops to not hear her, like he had asked. The thought annoyed her.

"Then the morning inspections!" she went on, raising her voice a little, just to make a point to herself, if to no one else. "Do you realize the absurdity of it? Hello, you metalclad, greatsword-wielding, killing machines. Did you make your bed this morning?"

The infuriatingly predictable man seemed to ignore her, instead nodding his command at his troops, with that usual strict expression, which looked sculpted on his face, rather than worn. The men seemed to respond to this demeanor, she admitted. In a diplomatic meeting or a ballroom, he would be no different than weaponry on display: equally eloquent as a speaker and an awkward reminder of alternatives that ruined the mood for everyone. But here? A single nod would soon move the entire congregation, as if the slightest movement of his head or a slight change in his expression had the sound of dozens of metal boots echoing in thunderous clatter. He had also devised great ways for her magic to compliment his troops and vice versa. She admired that, perhaps as much as she hated the repetitive drills on them.

Wait. Weaponry on display. Her eyes widened and her fingers started taping her sides nervously, as she let her mind wonder to the scrying devices she had planted.

He did not ignore her but she would have to wait. There were procedures. With his leave given in a sharp nod, his sergeants bellowed "at ease" commands that echoed in the silence of the growing twilight, with metal boots following in thunderous clatter. It was a familiar, comforting sound that had accompanied his own dusks and dawns for decades.

"It is about discipline, order, small accomplishments" he replied in the end, clasping his hands behind his back, as they turned and started climbing the stairs back to the command post. "One of my commanders once told me that if you want to change the world, start by making your bed".

His uncle had insisted on bringing a mage to his troops. A stout Imperialist, the Duke wished to support the Imperial institutions, as well as to add the prestige and power of the Chapters to his retinue. An Imperialist to the core himself, he had supported the idea, but the Aelomancer was proving to be… a challenge for him. As quick to action as she was to boredom, her magic was, he admitted to himself, a powerful addition to his uncle's forces, not to mention she often provided an entirely different point of view than his, with a keen mind for strategy, even if unorthodox. A valuable asset, surely, even if his strict, military mindset was thrown off-balance by her demeanor and his disciplined nature often could not shake an uneasy feeling in her presence. He made a mental note to add even more exercises for her and his men in the drill schedule. If they shared such feelings, he needed to be sure they were used to her presence and methods on the field.

“One of mine said something else” she retorted. There it was again, a total shift, in both attitude and subject. Her voice was blunt, distant even, the joking irony that dressed it before now gone entirely, as she stared in the distance, tapping her leg arrhythmically with her left hand. He frowned, his spine shivering uncomfortably by the sudden mood change before she went on, turning to speak to him as if focused on the conversation again. Her hand stopped tapping as well, now motioning while she spoke, as was her custom.

“He said ‘a settled mind makes a blind eye’. I think both yours and your uncle’s are too settled to see that your dear cousin is hosting one too many soirees attended by Sovereign-friendly Knights, even as we speak.” He frowned, surprised.

“What would you suggest?” he asked solemnly.

“I would suggest we attend. With a small escort guard, of course”, she answered, as the sun set behind them, painting sky, helms and steel swords in bloody red.

Kingdom Spotlight Pravia: The City of Stone Kings

Originally founded as a trading outpost with the lands of the Polmag princes, Pravia begun forming over three and a half centuries ago. Its importance as a trade station along with its location ensured its prosperity and it did not take long for the busy trading outpost to evolve into a city in its own right. Its domination of the surrounding areas, mainly through its financial influence but also its readiness to use arms when needed, would see it become a Kingdom, even if not in the traditional sense of the word.

While self-proclaimed a Kingdom, Pravia has never had a King, nor would one be suffered as its ruler, a result of its precarious location and the influence of multiple cultures within its walls. To ensure a balance between the Polmag princes to its east and the structure of neighbouring powers to its west, north and south, Pravia was named a Kingdom but was ever ruled by a Prince. This is also where most place the beginnings of the city’s most known tradition: the Stone Kings. It is said that even the first rulers of Pravia would built a statue of an imaginary King and name it the only authority above them in the Kingdom. The first Emperor to have annexed Pravia did not alter the city’s politics, recognizing Princes as rulers of the Kingdom of Pravia. To this day, the likeness of all Emperors can be found among the faces of the Stone Kings of their time, being truly the only authority above Pravia’s local rulers.

With the collapse of the Empire, this status quo was maintained; neutrality, after all, favours trade, and being a reason for confrontation and a field of battle between its best clients would serve only them. Were it not a Kingdom, any Polmag Prince could propose a claim to it, while were it to have its own King, any established Kingdom could trace an obscure connection to the throne. All this, however, is diplomacy and in the Hundred Kingdoms conquest is the greatest diplomatic argument. With a vote in the Conclave, its lack of properly titled Sovereign has left its rule open to claims from all sides time and again.

As a response to historic necessity, Pravia's wealth has ensured that it maintains a strong military force to guarantee that its lands and throne are not contested lightly. Not by outsiders, at least. Pravian Noble Houses have proved more than happy to contest for the reigns of the Kingdom among themselves and considering that Pravia was one of the first kingdoms to allow noble titles to be sold for wealth, the candidates for ascension have not been few. While cloak, dagger and poison methods may be preferred, being the least disruptive to trade, open war between opposing Pravian forces is frequent and the speed of succession of its rulers almost unparalleled, with rulers coming from a superbly diverse group of cultures and beliefs and supported by all kinds of powers of the Hundred Kingdoms.

Despite its unstable internal politics, or rather because of them, the city's old town is one of the world's wonders. The tradition of the Stone Kings has continued uninterrupted for centuries and today over three hundred statues built by Pravian rulers can be found in Pravia. The number would have been higher (which would mean that more than one statue per year of the city's existence has been erect), but for Prince Piotr I, who, once he assumed the throne, destroyed all previously built statues. He was found dead the next morning in his bed. Such a monstrosity has never been repeated and the Stone Kings came to conquer the town of Pravia. Rivalling each other in magnificence -literally, as each ruler wanted to impress more than his predecessors- and shaped by the beliefs and views of the rulers that ordered them, Stone Kings were fashioned as Emperors, Aspects, Theist Saints, Knights, thinkers or heroes, each different in style, size and material used. Found in every square, bridge, fountain, park and even the walls of Pravia, they awarded her the epithet of 'City of Stone Kings'.

The Kingdom of Pravia can serve as an excellent battlefield for two opposing Hundred Kingdom armies. The multitude of backgrounds of claimants to its princely crown allows any combination in Warlords, commanders and units on the field. This also allows for a variety of colour schemes on the field, while for Pravia's rulers, the Kingdom's shield is supported by a crow (right) and a dragon (left), with a Prince's crown surrounding the waste of a white statue king, on a field of white, blue and red. Smaller adornments are changed according to the principals and origins of each ruler.

Kingdom Spotlight Arburg: The Kingdom of Craftsmen

If founding legends are to be believed, Arburg started very small: a single house of pioneers, among the first to have left the warmth of the Bounty, once the Long Winter had begun to recede. The legendary head of the family, Arbeus Beiter, was a woodsman, skilled in both hunting and woodworking. Confident in his skill, he led his family east to claim land unclaimed by those who called themselves nobles and Kings. Braving weather, beasts and isolation from civilization, the Beiters found shelter in a natural passage, rich in water, wood and game, and with a small patch of land rich enough to sustain a family with a modest supply of vegetables.

By the time the mass migration from the shores of the Bounty begun, the Beiters were well settled. The family's stories claim their forefathers built small houses, empty, save for stored

wood, intended to make the land appear settled already and unable to sustain more. As caravans and convoys became more frequent, however, the family saw multiple opportunities. First, they expanded their small farmhouse, building a second floor to serve as an inn, while serving guests with modest but warm meals and spirits made from berries. As no roads had been opened yet, however, the rough, uneven paths that the caravans of settlers were forced to take offered an opportunity that would define the future of the family and the entire area. Skilled carpenters by necessity in their isolation, the Beiters expanded their house further with a woodwork station that made carriage repairs for passing convoys.

The ruse of the empty houses would not hold forever. Eventually, others settled the surrounding land, and while the Beiters today claim they were approved by their forefathers, it is hard to give this claim much credit. Still, the truth is that the Beiters remained the dominant force of the area, not only because of their older claim or great numbers, but also because of their wealth. The 'Beiter Woodworks Workshop' had gained fame through settlers but more importantly, it had gained the admiration and respect of caravan drivers. Once trade became frequent among new-found Kingdoms, many were those that preferred passing by the Beiters for rest and repairs both, if their route brought them close.

As its reputation grew, the workshop attracted more craftsmen around it, all seeking clientele in the convoys that visited the Beiters. Blacksmiths offered repairs to tools and shoeing horses, leatherworkers made harnesses and saddles or mended those that could be mended. It did not take long for riches to start flowing through Arburg, as the village came to be known, and, as neighboring powers and Kingdoms grew, it was not long before covetous eyes fell upon it. It was chance that saved its independence. A group of masons, last employed by the Order of the Sealed Temple for the building of a Priory, had heard of this society of craftsmen and came to Arburg, escorted by Templars. Once they realized the situation, the Knights made sure their presence became wildly known to dissuade claims of nobility on the land. The descendants of the Beiters today claim that it was their own decision, wishing to preserve what had become a haven for craftsmen and artisans but records show that very soon after, Klaus Beiter, head of the family at the time, produced papers that proved his noble origins from the Old Dominion. Since most Beiters had married into the other artisan families that had settled around them, the higher and lesser nobility of the area was born overnight. Not surprisingly, construction of a small Sealed Temple priory begun almost at the same time.

The cooperation with the Orders ensured Arburg's prosperity. Under their protection, it wasn't long until the crafters united under the Beiter house and started producing their own carriages, equipped with the experience of generations repairing their parts, be they wood, metal or leather. In time, the Orders supported an Imperial Decree that allowed the Beiters to form their own Guild of craftsmen and traders, expanding Arburg's influence and ensuring its coffers would be full. The preference of carriage drivers soon became standard practice for most convoys, and Arburg became a powerhouse of trade, not simply as a station for passing convoys, but also as a massive exporter of its many produces.

Today, Arburg houses the largest craftsman and industrial complex of the Kingdoms, producing everything from furniture, boots and clothes, to armor, weapons and, it is claimed, the best shields of the Kingdoms, sustained and advanced by numerous artisan schools and opportunities for apprenticeships under true master craftsmen. Its caravans reach even the furthest corners of the Kingdoms and the lands of the Russ Principalities, while rumors claim they have standing trading agreements even with the City States. While the Beiter House still rules, it is very much held in place by the local Guild's council. While most members of the Guild's council are part of the local nobility, and distant relatives to the Crown, the Guild is open to successful traders and artisans of humble origins, even if in a limited manner. Old Conclave nobility looks down upon such relationships with commoners, but still, the Guild controls the area with the iron fist of a masterfully equipped army and an array of impressive war engines, well settled on its mighty walls. Many claim that it is their longstanding coalition with the Orders that keep Arburg from selling their weapons of war and siege but it is perhaps a simpler and truer explanation to assume that Arburg wants to keep its advantages in war to itself.

The name-sake capital of the Kingdom is a marvel, perhaps not of beauty, but definitely of ingenuity. The landscape around it is filled with artisan workshops that toil day and night, with cranes taller than buildings constantly at work to make sure that newly produced goods are moved, stored and loaded fast. Its massive trading station has a unique system for loading and unloading goods, compatible only with the carriages produced in what is known as 'Arburg style'. But perhaps the most impressive of its features are its walls, famed for the genius of their design. They are a complex maze-like construction that runs through all districts of the city, instead of simply encompassing its entirety. Not only does this make it impossible to conquer the city completely, save by piece by piece, but it also provides an unhindered passage for troops to move to all sides of the city, with retractable bridges to isolate each section if needed. Even the buildings are part of the city's defenses, designed to force potential besiegers into narrow corridors, where murder holes on nearby walls await and rows of spears connected to cog-based devices stand ready to stab blindly and repeatedly, operated by crews of twos or threes. If rumors are to be believed, numerous other traps await would-be conquerors; some of the larger buildings are designed to be brought down upon unsuspecting enemies with the pull of a single lever. Some key sections of the walls can be moved, isolating enemies or changing viable routes through the city within an hour. Entire streets await to be collapsed into spiked pits, taking enemy regiments with them.

Seemingly unassailable, such tall tales are hard to believe and not all is bright or safe in Arburg's future. The Orders' protection is long gone, as their influence has all but evaporated, and the Beiter dynasty is desperately lacking in allies within the Conclave. The modern aggression of the Palatinate could find fertile ground in the form of the Spire Merchant Princes. Already voices claim in the Conclave that Arburg trades with the Spire of the Devil's Finger and the lack of evidence seems not to dissuade those raising them. What's worse is that the events of Nepenthe have many guild members raise concerned voices. Spire forces are seen outside the Devil's Finger, they say, and their patrols do not seem content to staying close to the Spire itself,

urging the Beiter House to not wait, as Brandengrad did, but instead strike first. While such propositions are dangerous, the fact remains that Arburg is a massive cache of various resources at the borders of a Spire and its silence can no longer be taken for granted.

The Kingdom of Arburg can be an excellent thematic battlefield, with an urban terrain, narrow corridors for bloody encounters and patches of difficult terrain for collapsed buildings. Arburg Characters would fittingly carry heirlooms such as the Standard of Steel or the Finite State Apparatus, while a color scheme of green, white and brown would match the city's coat of arms, for those who want that extra flare of lore in their army. Whether your Arburg wars against Kingdom rivals, the Spire of the Devil's Finger or a warband of Dweghom who want to compare craftsmanship in that unique manner of theirs, Arburg awaits brave commanders to lead its armies!

The Pilgrim, The First Letter:

Sankt Volto
the Thirtieth day of Febus
in the Year of Our Penance 501

At last, beloved,

I have reached a verdict about my penance. Here, in the prison of my own making, near the end of four fortnights of fasting, my soul clad in prayer to shell my guilt much like my body was clad in the grey cloth of the penitent to cover my dignity, here is where finally Theos' will was revealed to me. '*In the poise of all is where the Lord's voice whispers',* as the Saint writes and indeed it was so.

It was dusk. I would know it not, sunk in the darkness of covered windows as I was, but for the first hymns of Vespers, which reached me in my seclusion, piercing walls and soul alike. The familiar notes made my mind race to the image of the heavens at sunset. It was so clear, beloved, the image, this vision, the experience so complete! I *was* there, at the top of the steps of the Cathedral, looking west, so much so that I could feel the night breeze against my cheeks and dancing with the end of my robes, its light chill making my skin shiver. I remained there for some time, staring at the setting sun while continuing my prayer but then I sighed as my eyes followed the colors that seemed to flow from it; gleaming, glorious light sharpening the rim of clouds, glowing against a sky of melting gold, turn crimson then magenta as the river of colors flowed further east, only to fall, still, cold and dark, into the night sky's black. I never let my eyes reach that far.

Fear clutched at my throat, stealing my breath with boney fingers, a fear powerful, familiar and old. I have spoken to you of this, beloved, in those early stolen afternoons, when youthful elation still made happiness seem possible. Where others saw glory and majesty in the setting sun, where the romantic saw their melancholy embodied in the colors before dusk (oh, how

dramatically you sighed, I remember!), where all saw beauty, I ever saw just dread and the coming of darkness. I saw the silencing of hope, the stillness of joy, and an urge would besiege me, to flee, to run in the opposite direction, as if running east would help me meet the sun the earliest. It was so in my vision as well.

My penitent prayers were halted, my eyes stuck right on the line where the magenta sky turned to black without end. The wind fell silent, as did my thoughts, drowned by the presence of a terror I could not see, and I could hear nothing but my own breaths, hasted as if they were my last. Yet, for all the intensity of the dread that shook my body, there was no threat, no crux behind its hold over me, save, perhaps a force of custom before every sunset ever witnessed. The Vespers prayers reached me once more, softly, distant, whispered almost from another world, and I recognized the verses and their meaning. And at last His will was known to me and I knew my fear without reason to be the awe before His presence and my urge to flee to be His call.

Three are the Paths of Pilgrimage of our faith: the Path of Blood, from Velonest, the birthplace of Saint Nicholas the Martyr, to his resting place in Königstadt , taken usually by the Crimson Monks and those faithful that pray for an end to a loved one's suffering; the Path of Spears, from the shores of the Bitter Sea to the Mount of Zahn, where Saint Gheorg slew the Beast, taken by faithful warriors and the Sicarii. And finally, the greatest, the Path of Penance, from Argem to the Claustrine, taken only once per one hundred years, on the century anniversary of the *Transiens Tenebris*.

Theos willing, I am to leave at first light tomorrow with the other pilgrims. I know this to be what I must do. *It is in the poise of things*, beloved. Between the night sky and the day's fleeting light, between the silence of my solitude and the hymns of Vespers, at the end of my four fortnights of prayer asking for forgiveness, my vision would have me run to the east… One day before the Path of Penance would be taken, at the dawn of the new century. It cannot be chance, beloved, it can only be His will and I…

I am sorry, beloved. I know my religious ardor sometimes vexes you. You always thought my faith was coming before you. The hollow stare you wore the day before my anointment still haunts me. Know that I was only thankful, in the end. Even now, I do not think I would have found the strength to take my vows otherwise. You must know that I may at times know elation in my faith but I will never know happiness without you. I feel that leaving Sankt Volto would help us both. In His infinite wisdom, the Lord knows this too and called me. I am only sorry for the pain I caused you. That and only that I feel as sin above all else, for I never betrayed our love. I carry it still at heart, as I carry you, beloved.

Always,
H

P.S.: I do not wish this letter to end in such a manner. I promise I will write as often as I can and write of all I see! I will write to you of Argem, next, beloved.

The Province of Galania: It is often said among Galans that it is in their land where the gifts of Ninuah and her Bounty have been truly made manifest throughout the ages. Indeed, it would seem so. The old imperial province of Galania is blessed with rich soil, good farming weather and nourishing rivers, the combination of which yields plentiful crops, fruits and, most famously, wines. But for all its natural beauty and wealth -from the imposing dales and ravines leading to the west, to the clear topaz waters of its shores and all the valleys and green, rolling hills, vineyards and rivers in between- and for all the prized products that originate in their beautiful lands, Galans pride themselves above all else for their influence in the arts, education and higher culture of the Kingdoms. But the greatest pride still comes from their military contribution in the form of the Knights, or so claim the Galans, who, ignoring the Orders, trace the institution back to the legendary founder of their oldest Kingdoms.

While many believe the myth is full of anachronisms, tradition names Tancred, famously a mounted warrior and chieftain of a Galton group of Old Dominion refugees, as the founder of the three first Galan Kingdoms and indeed the father of the Galan people. Legends go on to number with flare and gusto the many acts of gallantry and heroism that Tancred performed, uniting various groups of refugees against the Keltonni in the process. Historians today claim that Tancred, while not a fictional character, has been… refined by tradition, his story and circumstances much filtered and reshaped by Galan literature, underlining that even the term "Galan" didn't appear until the establishment of the Empire's provinces.

The historical Tancred is believed to have been a chieftain of brigands, chased from the plentiful shores of the Bounty during the arrival of the Orders. Caught between the Orders, which sought to bring lawfulness to the Heartlands, and the Keltonni border forts in the north and west, established to secure the lands against the latest waves of refugees, Tancred and his group preferred to face the latter. While there is no record of the campaign Tancred led against the Keltonni, in its end, his group had indeed secured their own territory. In time, his rule was recognized by the Orders, whose true aim was to create a stable status quo rather than enforce some obscure definition of nobility and right of rule. Named Lille at the time, Lerac would be established but Tancred would not rest. Saon would follow, starting its existence as a fort for an expedition exploring the lands east, once the Long Winter started to recede and new passages opened shyly. In the twilight of his years, Elysses would become Tancred's vision of bliss, a last settlement blessed by the waters of the Bounty. Historians readily challenge this narrative, underlining that, considering the logistical difficulties and weather conditions, it is time-wise nearly impossible that all three of these Kingdoms were first established by the same person.

Ruthless brigand or gallant leader, the legend of Tancred would inspire local nobility in the generations that followed. Its members would be trained in the art of mounted combat and greater or lesser Kings in the region were expected to lead in the same manner. At that time, this practice was problematic; after a century of winter who had only just began to break, the lands further from the shores of the Bounty could barely sustain the settlers, much less many horses. Those that could be sustained were valued greatly, treasures to fight over, rather than to

be lost in combat, more helpful in breaking the frozen earth under the plow rather than breaking enemy lines. The answer to the dilemma came from the Orders that had forced the original settlers to claim those frigid grounds in the first place: an elite, heavily armored type of combatant with a barded horse. It would not be long until the merits of this expensive practice became apparent to all nobility; a heavy armor and strong warhorse became symbols of rank and prestige, awarded for favor and influence.

The rise of the Tellian Empire would trample on these traditions almost overnight, as the Emperor ensured that knighthood would not turn into a social tool or title of influence but rather it become a strictly military one, awarded based on merit only to those of proven skill, determination and mettle. What is more, only those of the rank of Margrave, Count Palatine and above would be able to knight a candidate and even that only if certain conditions were met. Various Knightly Oaths were born as a response by different cultures in different provinces, the local nobility trying to adapt to the new law but the simple reality was that the nobility, established and aspiring, suffered from this decree. The standards set by the Imperial Throne for knighthood were just too high and the nobles ranked high enough too few and, protected by the Imperial mantle, too indifferent to bend the law. In Galania, however, things evolved a little differently.

The Household of the de Leracs, connected through marriage to the Imperial line since its inception, would readily use this connection to try and establish dominance over the entire province. Once the Empire was truly established, however, this backfired spectacularly, with the Throne ensuring no such great power could rise to challenge the Empire. First of all, he would divide the Galan lands into two provinces, Galania and Galania-Trans-Sinia. Then, much like the de Leracs would use their relation to the Imperial Household, so would the Emperor use his connection to them and “the Father of Galans”, Tancred. Backed by the noble Households outside Lerac, the Emperor would be crowned “King of Galans”, a title added to the many of Emperors that followed, while the traditional title of the heir apparent to the Imperial Throne would be “Duke of Galania”. This left little room for the highest echelons of nobility throughout the province. The titles of all Galan Households would suffer irrevocably, their right to royalty and wide rule forever overshadowed by the Imperial Throne. As compensation and to pacify any violent grudges, the heads of the old Royal lines of Elysses, Lerac and Saon, already established as powerhouses in the province, would be named Count Palatines by the Emperor, while the Imperial Margrave would also traditionally come from this province. This guaranteed the rule of the previously established royalty in their respective areas, safeguarding their importance and might by allowing them their knightly tradition to endure. At the same time, however, it ensured that the Imperial Household was the one all these knights would answer first and foremost to, through the Imperial Margrave.

Adapting to the new regime and adopting the narrative of heroic warriors in true Galan style, each of the three grand powers of Galania would shape their own legends and form their own Knightly pledges, oaths and vows under their Counts Palatine. The “Bounty Vow” of Elysses, the

“Pledge to the Lily” of Lerac and the “Oath of Lions” of Saon are but the most well-known among them, connected to the three dominant Households of the province. *Of* the three however, not to mention the numerous similar traditions spawned in other Kingdoms, the Oath of the Lion would in time spread throughout the Empire’s lands, resonating best the military culture of nobility, its creed demanding constant proof of a Knight’s worth and absolute loyalty to their Household. Today the Lion is a de facto default sumbol carried by Household Knights everywhere, even as some Households have kept different symbols and pledges alive for their Knights. Some say that the support of Saon by the Theist Church played a role in this and it indeed it could be so. Saon’s seat of rule was transferred to Leona right on the borders with Hermania, where construction of a cathedral had already begun and in which their rulers would since be blessed by the local Bishop, while and the oath of Lions was endorsed by the Theist Church. While the endorsement held no institutional significance, it added a prestige to its knights that resonated well with the mostly Theist nobility all over the Hundred Kingdoms.

After the dissolution of the Empire, Galania was suddenly left with countless lesser titles, which held little meaning in the absence of an Emperor, King and Duke. Overnight, the province became ripe for the taking by neighboring nobles of higher titles for, should any of the local noble Households try and claim such a title previously held by the Imperial House, it would instantly mean a claim to the Hollow Throne… and a rapid and violent response by every Kingdom of the dissolved Empire. To avoid such an incident, it was decided very early on from the Conclave that the tradition of elevating the three Counts to the title of Count Palatine would be adopted by the Conclave as well, making the title all but hereditary, even as there is no true guarantee that the heir apparent to each County would also be the one named Count Palatine by the Conclave. Household politics and schemes would become the number one occupation of most generations in the three so-called High Counties, for, for all intents and purposes, the title is perceived as equal to that of “King” in any other province and Galania’s three major Counties are perceived as Kingdoms in their own right.

Rich, powerful and with a strong tradition of knighthood, noble Households in Galania have had peculiarly limited true wars between them since the rise of the Tellian Empire, with few and far between exceptions. While certainly not without disruptions in their history, this saw their three major cities becoming some of the oldest established Kingdoms, their wider influence within the province practically unchallenged for centuries. While lesser Galan Households never shied away from battle, the three major players of the region, occupied by their internal schemes for elevation to Count Palatine, ever preferred to not upset the status quo too much, opting to act against third parties through proxy lesser households. A prime example was the War of Eleven Lilies, a famous and very violent period of twenty years that followed the Dissolution, which saw no less than eleven Baronies and lesser counties war each other, urged by all of the three Count Palatines and their aspiring successors.

At its end, the War only marginally rearranged any sphere of influence, and today, while often romanticized and glorified in the arts, politically it is mostly being perceived as… uncouth, not to

mention financially unsound. Since then, the might and wealth of the three major cities is reserved for “outside” aggressors but for struggles between them, they prefer to display their might in Tourneys, feasts and, only when forced, the field of battle through proxies. When simple shows of power don’t prove enough for Galan affairs to be settled, marriage alliances, political schemes and even assassinations often bring the desired result, while avoiding the much less refined and much more expensive tool of open war.

The recent “Enque Incident” with the Spire of Haustellum and the Fire Drought that befell Lerac have already heralded unprecedented changes in the province. The de Lerac Household is no more, an unbroken line of rulers since antiquity meeting a violent end during a revolt ignited by the drought. With the Count Palatine –along with an attending Braeon druid figurehead- dead by the hands of commoners, an occurrence not seen since the Red Years, the true consequences are anyone’s guess and everyone’s fear. While Dorná de Rosmund has fused the County with hers to bring order, elevating herself to the title of Marquise in an attempt to fill the power vacuum left by the Count Palatine’s death, neither Elysses nor Leona are expected to sit idly by. What’s more, effectively led by devout Theist Mikael von Kürschbourgh, Leona already brings forces near Lerac, claiming that the true culprits of all this corruption -and even the Fire Drought- are the devils in the Spire of Haustellum, a notion that gains increasing momentum following the events with Nepenthe in Riismark.

Tensions rise in Galania, making its beautiful lands a prime battlefield table, filled with rivers, forested areas and hills for some interesting terrain, and even farmhouses on the field, which a forward-thinking Warlord might have converted into impromptu garrisons. Hundred Kingdom armies with Knights supported by a strong Militia presence are solid choices for a Galan Warlord, while Leona supporters can readily add a Theist Priest to field their Militia forces with. To add to the mix of war, who is to say how the ancient Spire of Haustellum will answer to the provocations it receives or even to the violence among humans around it? Their elders rarely allow things to evolve without intervention, after all… And for the more violently inclined, the Hold of Ghe’Domn and its many lesser Clans are not as far as the Galans would have liked.

Cities of Galania

LEONA: The Paeneticum’s foothold in Leona has long been established, steering its history. While Leona has long thrived due to its strategic location, giving a solid foundation for the seat of rule of the County to be transferred from Saon, it has also blossomed into a center of belief under Theist patronage and the cathedral of Lionum is a favored place of study for neophytes and anointed priests both. Its knights, long “approved” by the Paeneticum, have also secured lands in the province of Hermania with little to no political backlash in the Conclave. As a small counterbalance to this, the Counts Palatine of Leona have found it easy to assign Herman lesser nobles as marshals to their forces. Today, however, this practice takes its toll. During the Enque Incident, Leona saw an opportunity to influence Lerac baronies by showing its support… with as many troops as it could muster. To add to the display, the Count’s marshal summoned the devout Theist baron Mikael von Kürschbourgh, brother to the Duke of Kürschbourgh, and, some

claim, an unlawfully anointed priest, along with his famously trained – and aggressive- troops. Even though the Enque Incident was resolved by Lerac's Count, von Kürschbourgh never left Leona and neither did his troops, "ensuring the safety" of the cathedral. The baron enjoys the Paeneticum's favor more so than the Count Palatine, who has practically dislodged the rightful ruler of Leona. Under his control, however, it has blossomed into a military powerhouse, its forces benefiting from both Hermann and Galan military cultures. Many are those that think that Leona, through Baron von Kürschbourgh, is the closest the Paeneticum has come to armed forces and indeed it would seem so. Following the events of Nepenthe and the trial of King Fredrik of Brandengrad, members of Leona's militia were the first seen escorting Priests on the field of battle.

ELYSSES: Elysses controls most of the lands being wetted by the Bounty in Galania. It is a magnificent sea-side city, a jewel of modern architecture with marble domes and sky-high palaces, theaters and music halls, while statues of Deist Aspects loom over the topaz waters on its shores. The Count Palatines of the city ever favored the Lady of Waters as an Aspect of the Mother and have declared her to be the patroness of Elysses but the city is jeweled with shrines to all Dei and many a Questor of one Aspect or another are allowed to preach freely. A haven for free thinkers and the arts, with theater and music being favored, it would be easy to name Elysses an oddity among Kingdoms, where might of power comes second to splendor and more refined pursuits. This could not be further from the truth. Outside its white walls, the lands further from the shores are rich like in most of Galania and Elysses rules over them with an iron, knighted fist, ensuring the wealth its city's magnificence demands to be sustained. For all its apparent splendor and tolerance, a mere visit to the farmhouses that actually support Elysses' extravagance will underline the difference of living standards between those in the city and all those outside. But while the land is rich and its knights plenty, the County's true power lies in the massive Port-d'Elyss, a port that, if left unchecked, could rival Argem's naval force itself, having produced the "Vague Elyssée", the only "Man-of-War" ship outside the fleet of Argem. Long thought of as a Kingdom in its own right, the Bounty is dominated by Argem's naval force and it is questionable if Austersian Admiral Staur will allow such a power to rise much further. Undoubtedly this is known to Elysses, the weakened state of Lerac, however, and the challenge issued by its new ruler and her title is bound to force its eyes fixed on the lush plains of the northern city…

LERAC: The Household of the de Leracs has held sway over northern Galania, controlling the bridges over the river Sinia, almost since forever. Surprisingly, however, Lerac's wealth comes not from the taxation of trade convoys, like in the case of most similarly situated sovereignties. In fact, Lerac ever offered some of the cheapest passage tolls in the Kingdoms, ensuring through quantity rather than pricing that its toll coffers remained full. The county's true wealth, however, comes from its own exports: some of the best wines of the Kingdoms hail from the fertile lands south of the Sinia. With a rich land to rule and knights to command, the de Leracs have ever presented themselves as the true heirs of Tancred and the true royal lineage of all Galania, speaking of the Galans as one nation, instead of a people or cultural group. This bizarre

concept and outrageous assertion has largely been ignored, of course, yet many are the nobles that claim that dividing the Galan lands -and specifically Lerac's territory- into two provinces was a targeted move by the Emperor, so long ago. More still are those that, loath to allow such dangerous notions to spread, claim that the ill fate that recently befell the family was the product of their own self-importance and their ill-conceived empowering of their people. They may not be wrong. The Enque incident put fear in the hearts of north Galania and, coupled with the loss of two of his sons' (one murdered and another disappeared) it saw Count Palatine Philippe de Lerac withdraw from the world. The end to his rule and line would come not long after. For years after Enque, the County was plagued by both a long draught and the Red Fever, which brought the land to its knees until a revolt broke out. The Count Palatine lost his life at the hands of his own people, accused for treason and conspiring with both the Braeons and the Spires, to feast in luxury while his people starved. His last surviving son, Alfos, a boy of less than fourteen winters, has disappeared since, presumed dead while officially marked a traitor and a fugitive, thus sealing the fate of the de Lerac Household. Dorná Gertrude de Rosmund has ruled since, claiming the County and merging it with her own in Rosmund over the Sinia, proclaiming herself Marquise de Feranque and establishing the island settlement of Lut on the Sinia as her capital. She has survived five assassination attempts already, including one from the fabled Braeon Hunters of Ourovoros, but this talented Aelomancer and shrewd politician seems determined to establish herself as a protector to her people and a dominant force in both sides of the Sinia.

ENQUE: This otherwise insignificant Barony in the south side of Lerac's county, would perhaps be unworthy of further mentioning, where it not for the recent so-called "Enque Incident", a strife with the Spire of Haustellum in the Barony's borders. A few years ago, rumors started circulating that the Baron of Enque was trading with someone in the Spire. Fueled by his faith, as well as surrounded and challenged by numerous legitimate and illegitimate siblings, the Baron's son accused his father openly and led his forces near Haustellum, in a display of force that was meant to intimidate its villainous inhabitants. His display was matched almost immediately by Spire forces. Panicked missives were sent to all possible allies but as more forces poured it on the side of Enque, the Spire force would ever match the display. When Leona sent word of sending reinforcements, Philippe, the Count Palatine of Lerac was forced by circumstances to join, bringing one of the biggest forces in Galania with him. Again human forces were matched in size, within minutes. As escalation seemed inevitable, the Count Palatine met with the Spirelords to parley. When he returned, he ordered all human forces to withdraw. Even as the Spires did the same, his decision, coupled with the strain of the Fire Draught, would lead to the insurrection which claimed Philippe's life. Despite the efforts of Dorná de Rosmund to stabilize Lerac, Elysses and Leona eye its weakened lands, while the war that is boiling in Riismark with Nepenthe will undoubtedly bring further tension and even skirmishes with the Spires.

Vercy: Situated in the centre of Galania Trans Sinia, Vercy is known as the Garden City. The reason for this becomes quickly apparent as soon as one lays eyes on it. Built in the centre of a

vast plain, many called Vercy the Emperor's Folly. Having decided that Argem in the summer was too humid and hot, a very young Emperor Ludwig II, sought to build a palace in what he hoped would become the summer capital of the Empire. The location of Vercy was chosen for its location, roughly central to the Hundred Kingdoms, rather than any salient geographical feature or socioeconomic aspect. When the nobility, particularly those familiar with the geography of the area heard of the location, they scoffed at the notion that the plan would succeed.

Enraged by the dismissal of his grand vision Ludwig (who would be remembered as one of the more eccentric and excitable Emperors… also one of the most memorable) doubled down on his claim. If the region were not beautiful or interesting he would make it so. If nothing grew there, he would ensure he possessed the most lush and beautiful gardens in the Empire. He was true to his word.

The Summer Palace of the Emperor is a veritable city onto itself. A fantastical confection of marbled pillars, frescoes patios and massive windows. Hundreds of rooms and dozens of halls stand over a warren of servant's quarters and store rooms. But that is not even the most impressive part of the palace. The Emperor was true to his word, and fashioned a garden like none other before it. Fashioned with the aid of the Mason's Guild it is the world's largest greenhouse with a dozen separate halls catering to a dozen different environments. Staffed at all times with no less than four Gifted practitioners who ensure the environment remains stable and constant, making the Imperial Gardens one of the wonders of Ea.

Once the palace was complete, the Emperor moved his court there and refused to return to Argem. Slowly but surely, the nobility was forced to accede to the Emperor's whim and relocated to Vercy. All of the great houses ultimately built palaces simply to be close to the Emperor (take into account that during the reign of Ludwig II the Empire was approaching the zenith of its power and the Emperor's wealth and power were unequalled) and slowly the Emperor's vision came to be and Vercy became a city of palaces, walled by a wooded park that took decades to complete.

Today the city stands much as it did in the heyday of the Empire. While succeeding Emperors moved the capital back to Argem, many saw the value in holding a traveling court, with Vercy by far the most common destination. With the collapse of the Empire, one would have thought that Very would vanish, but the opposite is true.

Following the death of the last Emperor the Conclave, eager to distance itself from the Chamberlain's centre of power, decided that the Conclaves would henceforth be hosted in Vercy. As a result, Vercy has a permanent population of courtiers and diplomats from all of the major houses year round. In fact, holding a palace in Vercy has in many ways become a mark of prestige and a statement that the House owning it considers themselves a claimant for the throne, each striving to outdo the other with ever more extravagant decorations and renovations. Patroled by a city guard composed of members of each house whose exact

composition are determined by the level of contributions each House makes to the city itself (ensuring it is one of the best funded and managed environments in the Hundred Kingdoms),Vercy has remained inviolate to this day as none dare tempt the wrath of the Hundred Kingdoms… and frankly would have no tactical gain beyond the plunder captured.

However Vercy is far from a paradisiacal environment. All of these palaces required a veritable army of servants and attendants to run, who in turn required countless others to provide for their needs. Unwilling to let the unwashed masses sully his creation, Ludwig decreed that the lay population of Vercy would live within four cantons in the outskirts of the city which his architects would design. Aware of the tendency of these slums to sprawl, he demarcated their limits with sturdy stone walls and had his city planners lay out the cities, issuing a decree that the number of buildings within each canton could not be changed to ensure their picturesque character.

Unfortunately the Emperor could not have foreseen the results of his decrees generations down the line as the populations of the cantons exploded. Limited to extending *already existing buildings* the commoners dug as deep as they could, and built as high as they could. They even interpreted the walls as being buildings, and built attop those as well! Each of these four cantons is now a bustling hive of human activity and ramshackle construction where sunlight cannot reach the street for the sheer profusion of buildings leaning over the street. The canton's entire economy revolves around fulfilling the needs of the gentry who live in the palaces. While butchers, slaughterhouses and honest craftsmen dominate trade by day, at night it is the world famous gabling dens and bordellos and other darker service providers that dominate the scene. It should come as no surprise that the cantons have become a haven of organized crime, with each canton controlled by a number of gangs and syndicates who ceaselessly vie for power and influence in the shadows, providing a stark contrast to the well patrolled and brightly lit boulevards and parks less than a few hundred meters away.

Character Portrait, Erich Schur: The Office of the Imperial Chamberlain has all sorts of uses, for all sorts of people. Erich Schur fulfills one particular role very well: he is the iron hand within the steel gauntlet.

Born 'in some gutter to some pox ridden prostitute', as he is famously fond of declaiming, Erich Schur comes from the humblest of beginnings. Adopted by a camp follower who found him squalling by training camps of the 7th regiment of the Steel Legion, army men and the army way of life is all Erich has ever known.

The only fond memories people have of the man seem to be from his childhood, where he participated in regimental drills and practices as a toddler. He quickly became something of a mascot, a good luck charm for the regiment, attending almost all the drills with the indefatigable energy and fervor of youth. It would not be false to say that, by the time he came of age, his body had been sculpted to that of a soldier. Regardless, malnutrition at a critical

developmental stage and fate conspired to keep him from ever joining the ranks of the Steel Legion by denying him the height needed to be accepted.

That didn't stop him from trying out at every trial. Each time he would rank first, and each time he would be passed over. A bitter life of disappointment and dissolution that would probably end in an alley stabbing was averted when the Imperial Chamberlain attended his last trial. Mildly impressed by the way he dismantled the favorite at the trials, his curiosity was truly piqued when he found out about his stubborn refusal to give up.

A small favor was called in after a few discreet inquiries were made and the next time Schur showed up at the trials, he was not passed over; he was offered a scholarship at the War College. The Chamberlain was a shrewd man, and he knew the Steel Legion would never bend their inflexible recruiting standards at his say so. He also knew a man like Schur would not accept charity from a stranger. His solution both allowed the Steel Legion to save face and assuaged the young aspirant's pride.

Schur was not a good student at the War Colleges. What he was was unstoppable. He struggled to learn his letters and numbers, but he never surrendered. By hook or by crook, through guile and a judicious use of force he earned his place in the War Colleges. When he graduated with a barely passing grade, he was surprised to find out his first commission had been bought by the Imperial Chamberlain. He served as an adjutant to Bastien Genest, one of the most respected and feared free captains of the Hundred Kingdoms. He cut his teeth during the siege of Narava, which also saw his first command.

Terse, unflinching and no stranger to the privation of the average soldier, Erich quickly endeared himself to the men under his command by sharing their burdens on the march and fighting in the front line. He is no way the world's greatest strategist. He does not outfox his foe from the command tent. He is a frontline leader who knows the limits of his men better than they know them themselves. Though his tally of victories is bloody, those men who fight under his command respect him because he understands the simple creed of the mercenary: he has chosen to put his life on the line, to wager it against gold. Sometimes this means you win, sometimes it means you lose and sometimes it means you die. The difference is he does not expend their lives recklessly, or value the court-born over the gutter-born. He fights alongside his men on every engagement, risking his own life as he would risk his men's. And for this they would follow him anywhere.

His skill with the blades has saved his life countless times, curiously more often off the field than on it. There are few men alive who have fought as many duels as Erich Schur. His meteoric rise, terse manners and common origin make him a natural target for the disdain of the nobility; his quick temper and impossible pride take care of the rest.

This simple fact is the only thing that has kept Erich from becoming one of the most successful Free Captains in the Hundred Kingdoms. He could have commanded his own mercenary host or retired to a life of wealth and luxury if he could only swallow his pride. Instead, he drinks and

brawls almost obsessively, displaying the vices that are attributed to common soldiers as much as he displays the virtues. If it were not for the efforts of a dedicated cadre of junior officers and veterans who all but worship him, the story of Erich Schur would no doubt have ended in a seedy alley behind a tavern with his cooling body feeding the city's carrion.

This situation suits the Chamberlains just fine, granting him almost exclusive use of one of the most proficient and successful mercenary front-line commanders in the Hundred Kingdoms. The Imperial crest rests almost permanently on Schur's armor as his employer's mark and, even if "the iron hand within the steel gauntlet" may not be the most elegant tool in the Chamberlain's arsenal, Schur's purpose is not to be elegant.

SIEVA THE WARD CITY: Sieva, the Shield City of the Hundred Kingdoms, is one of the most visually striking and impressive cities in the world. It is built at the base of the massive escarpment that spans the distance from the towering volcanic majesty of Mt Flaegros all the way south to the Karpathos Mts that bound the Hundred Kingdoms to the south. Officially named the *Petraepes*, but now simply called the Drop and it forms a natural border between the Hundred Kingdoms and the Polmag Principalities.

If one approaches the city from the West, the first thing he will see will be the towering majesty of the Petraepes. As he approaches closer, he will discern the city and all of its towering glory. One of the most distinctive characteristics of Sieva is its unique architectural features: the first is the sheer height of the buildings. In most cities the buildings might rise to two or three floors at best. In Sieva most buildings are at least three stories high, often taller. This is partly explained due to the materials used in their construction: the dense, tough granite that was quarried from the Petraepes to carve a usable path through it.

But the truth is that Sieva was always intended to be a fortress city. As a result the tall buildings are arranged in concentric circles, placed flush against each other with no windows on the ground level and only modest ones in the levels above. Small bridged alleys provide access through each circle and are the only way one can cross from each circle to the other, forming the cities eponymous Wards. There are central gates that provide access to carts and wagons in the city, but each of these is offset from the other, facing a different cardinal direction.

All of this means that in the event of an attack, the invader would have to fight through each Ward, clearing it building by building all the while the defender is attacking him from fortified positions atop the towers that comprise the vast majority of the city.

All of these tall gray buildings with no easy door access and few winds would make for a very foreboding and unwelcoming city. Two idiosyncratic features breathe life and color into Sieva. The first is the city's industry: cloth spinning and dyeing. Easy access to the Polmag wool markets in the east and the bountiful cotton fields of the northern plains by river provide ready access to the raw materials needed. The fast flowing river, the Danber, provides the power to countless mills while the miles of escarpment wall and rise and fall of the local topography provide a wealth of minerals and unique ecological niches for rare insect and vegetable dyes.

As a result, Sieva sports some of the most colorful clothing in the Hundred Kingdoms and the normally dour walls of the city are covered almost year round in brightly colored buntings as each noble house displays their wealth and influence while merchants advertise their wares while on the streets by tenting the small alleys, bringing even more color into even the smaller and darker corners of the city.

Given the defensive intent of every feature in the city, open spaces, even paved ones, few and far between. Coupled with narrow alleys and covered streets dedicated to business and commerce, there is little room for greenery or even leisure spots. As a result the residents discovered a unique use for the reinforced walls and tall towers they had: rooftop gardens. While only the wealthiest and largest towers in the city have actual grass and and on the rooftops, even the meanest tower will have a fenced and tiled roof with countless potted plants arranged around it. The beauty of ones rooftop garden has become a point of pride amongst the citizens of the city. Small walkways, either permanent stone arches or temporary wooden ones, create an ever shifting map of neighborhoods above the city, completely dedicated to leisure, relaxation and pleasure of every kind in stark contrast to the business dominated streets below.

While the original intent of the city's rulers was that this rooftop pleasure realm be the exclusive realm of the nobility and the wealthier citizens, time and daring youth have conspired to largely eliminate this stuffy protocol. In a city where even the lowest street tough can afford quality fabrics, it is hard to keep social barriers, especially when the nobility is keen to break them down and 'slum it' in style. As a result, the rooftop gardens and plazas range all the way from royal gardens to gaily colored drinking stands surrounded by potted greenery and every possible combination in between.

While the upper and middle class can afford to do so, even as rich a city as Sieva cannot possibly be expected to house its entire population in stone towers. Most of the cities working population and labor class lives in the unofficial Ward of the Quarries. Carved directly into the escarpment itself to source stone for the city once the pass had been cleared, the quarries resemble nothing more than an ants nest shorn exposed by the hand of an uncaring god. Hot in the summer and cold in the winter, the Quarries are carved directly into the rock face of the escarpment, as steep walkways and narrow cliffside paths and ladders connect each level with the ones above and below. Despite the precipitous drop and cramped quarters, the Quarries are nonetheless filled to capacity and beyond as the lure of a job in the vats and dying centres of the city lures many from the countryside creating a vertiginous city above the city. There is a pronounced drop in quality and refinement of both housing and tenant the higher one rises in the Quarry. In fact it is rumored that the upper levels of the quarry connect directly to the lower levels of the Fortress' dungeons and that one can pass from one hellish place to another if he knows the right people.

And that brings us to the Fortress, the largest military installation in the Hundred Kingdoms (although this is technically true only because the Sealed Temples is *not* part of the Hundred

Kingdoms) Its sprawling mass stands atop the Petraepes, carefully guarding the Pass that was carved into the escarpment, making it both a promise of future trade concessions or the threat of rapid mobilization against the principalities, and it is the cornerstone around which Charles Armatellum brokered his deals with the Polmag Principalities that made them vassals to the Tellian Empire.

Even a general description of its ramparts, walls and secrets would require another entry. Suffice to say, for now, that its garrisons, multiple keeps and dungeon levels have gone largely unused since the fall of the last Emperor, as the sheer cost of maintaining and garrisoning such a fortress demands a heavy toll from an Empire and would beggar any but the greatest of kingdoms in this Age. The Office of the Chamberlain keeps the central keep manned at all times and regularly sends patrols into the further reaches of this massive structure. Almost all of them return.

The Streets of Sieva: The veterans used to say there is always a time. One cannot truly escape it. They said that those who do try to escape it become like rocks on a mountain slope. They stand there, high above, looking at creation, motionless and grim. The elements will lay siege on them. Winds will whip them. Rain will gnaw at them. Snow will cover them. Hale will scar them. But still they will stand, firm. All that they will have suffered, all the scars and cold and silent pain, all the forces that would try to break them, all of it, would simply forge them. Little by little, their mind and body would be brought to just the right shape. Their edges sharpened, their weakest parts dissolved, their core strengthened from the pressures of the world, their path decided as firmly as the stone they are made of. And then, without warning, without the slightest indication, under the heat of sun's Light, their will would expand and push their body, and they would fall upon the world, laying waste to everything in their path. Neither angry, nor vengeful; perhaps not even willing. Simply inevitable.

She had shaken her head, then. She would wear the regalia, yes. She would carry the hammer and Shield. And she would honor and serve them but not through violence, she had said.

But now it was time.

The club had come out of nowhere. It had almost broken her skull sending her undone helmet flying off, but had settled for a tooth, which she had swallowed involuntarily. A snicker came from above her, taunting laughs and a cry reached her distantly. A girl. In her pain, she remembered in a flash; a Household's colors dancing; a crazed, hard-skinned veteran's face, too close to hers.

Her eyes widened even as she knelt, stunned and surprised, barely feeling another blow on her back shoving her down. She felt the kick on her side though, taunting more than damaging. Another flash, too horrible to contemplate. Her mind screamed. Then it paused.

Her eyes calmed. She had looked passively into this world for long enough. The same sins, the same crimes, the same monstrosities. The same duty and the same burden. The words of the veterans came to her mind.

“It is time,” she admitted.

She wiped the blood from her lips with the back of her hand, her mind reaching the source of her strength, forgotten and unused for so long. Her grey eyes flared like silver with anger and purpose, narrowed, scanning the dead-end alley before her, as relief from the pain poured over her. Four of them. The one who had hit her was covering her and the entrance, hidden unless you knew where to look. A second one stood in the middle of the alley, but was looking at the scene at the back, his hand resting on the dagger on his belt. Two at the end of the alley, laughing at their prey, who struggled to keep them at bay, wielding awkwardly a simple plank of wood.

“Stay down,” the one over her said when she moved, eyeing her but not making a move, still minding the entrance. “We’ll be with you and your pouches in a second.” She frowned at this.

She reached for her fallen weapon.

“Don’t turn a robbery into murder, tomboy,” the man above her said. A punch searched for her jaw again but this was no longer the same unprepared person that walked curiously in the alley moments ago, driven by the laughs and yells. She dodged with ease, as if her body couldn’t wait for instinct to take over once more. Her own fist landed on the assailant’s stomach. The thug cried and took steps back towards the alley, bending, as the others turned their heads.

“I will try…” came her honest reply in heavy, accented Tradespeak, as she got up, grabbing her weapon. Almost indifferently, she brought her maul on her shoulder. “…But I can’t promise. Of all depravities and crimes, I despise yours the most, see?”

“You worm!” the man she had punched yelled, even if his voice was not too certain. “We’ll falling kill you! You’re outnumbered!”

“I am,” she replied. “But see-..” she was interrupted as the man roared and charged at her. There was not enough space for a sweeping blow so she stroke vertically, bringing the maul down from her shoulder in an arch, even before the thug had reached a striking distance. The metal whooshed excitedly before it crushed on the man’s shoulder, a vicious crack echoing in the alley.

“…I am already addressing this problem, yes?” That got the others’ attention. They turned to face her properly, drawing knives from their belts.

“Leave,” the man called Jesh said, his expression cautious, calculating, eyeing her armor and weapon. Behind him, the young woman tried to smack him with the plank but the blow was weak by her trembling hands. Jesh shoved her almost absent-mindedly and she dropped against a corner where she curled, folding her legs before her and hugging them, her eyes widened in fear, her throat choking on panicked sobs.

Meanwhile, the wounded man near the warrior’s feet was groaning. She let her leg rest on the man’s head, the boot making him groan even more. “Girl,” she bellowed, her body casting a shadow on the dead-end alley as it covered most of the entrance, leaving only her grey eyes to glitter within her shadowed figure. “I have not fought beyond sparring for six years, four months and twenty one days”. She let the maul slide till it reached the ground thudding, metal first. “So, you will forgive me if I am not as quick as I could be, yes?”

The three thugs started moving.

The first to reach her was soon flying, the maul forming a long archway from low to high, dirt trailing behind it before it crashed its way upwards through his jaw. Before his lifeless body had reached the ground under the widened gazes of the other two -making the girl scream with the gory sight- the woman let out a warcry and charged, dropping the maul from her hand. In the confined space of close combat it would do more harm than good. And she wanted this to be close.

She rushed, shoulder first, towards the first one, who let out a surprised yell and stepped sideways avoiding the charge. There was a tiny flash and a clang, as his short blade slid across her shoulder-plate, sparks flying and metal sighing with a shriek.

Before the thug had managed to retract his hand, she turned, grabbing it and violently turning him to cover her back. The other man’s dagger pierced through his own comrade’s neck, aiming at where hers had been moments before and barely not reaching it. Showered in her enemy’s crimson, she let the body fall and she turned and punched Jesh in the face with a metal gauntlet, then grabbed him by the neck with the other keeping him at arms length. The knife flashed again but the blow was cut short, as the thug’s head met forcibly the wall behind him.

“Drop it,” she said coldly but the man pulled his hand to stab again, only for it to fall weakly as his head was smashed against the wall harder. Crimson tinted the wood and drops fell on his back.

“Drop it,” she repeated, her bright gaze piercing him and this time the thug complied.

“Good,” she said and kicked the knife away. “Go help your comrade by the entrance,” she went on. “And do not even think about trying anything, yes?” Jesh nodded and, released by her grip,

he coughed, dropping on one knee. But the moment she stepped back, he rushed towards the girl, drawing another knife from his boot.

There was a word shouted. The ground erupted in a spike, sharp enough to pierce through air, flesh and bones, just as Jesh was leaning to take the girl hostage. It stayed there for but a moment, then it crumbled, leaving the man to drop lifelessly next to the screaming girl. She was still screaming as the warrior approached her.

“You are safe, girl, yes?” she said almost merrily, a bloodied figure with wild hair, a swollen cheek, bright eyes and scarred face, blood dripping from her hair and an open smile showing a missing tooth. “I am…”

The girl fainted.

She sighed, tired, then allowed herself to pant freely for some moments, the calm facade dissolving, touching her swollen face with a wince. With her composure regained, she groaned as she picked up the girl, carrying her to the exit of the alley. She stopped there and looked down at the man with the broken collarbone. He was groaning, barely moving, face buried in the dirt.

“I did try,” she said and made to move on but stopped again.

“But not much,” she added before leaving.

Dorná “L’Urielle” de Rosmund: “*Understand this, Duke: I am not called the Shining Storm by my people because of my looks or because of my temper, as some would claim. I am called so because my people understand; for all within my house, I am the shelter. For those outside, I am the storm.*”

Dorná Gertrude de Rosmund is the daughter of Margrave Ludgar von Kazlag and Olivia de Rosmund. With her Gift apparent from a very young age, she spent her youth studying in the Pool of Stillness as an Aelomancer. When by decree of the Conclave her father was executed as an unsanctioned aggressor against a neighboring Kingdom, Dorná left the Chapter and sought safety in exile. She attracted attention again years later, when her grandfather, Count Olivier de Rosmund in Galania-Trans-Sinia, passed away without an heir, while she was already widowed and heiress to Lutia, a barony in the County of Lerac in Galania. With one foot south of the Sinia, the other north and enemies on both sides, the young countess seemed to have her days counted for her. Still, she earned the formal recognition of Count Palatine Philippe de Lerac as a baroness of his county and his informal protection even beyond the Sinia. Soon, she became one of the Count’s closest allies, an alliance that became deeper still when, six years later, the Count’s middle son of three, René, announced his engagement to Dorná’s daughter, Verná.

Despite the tragedy that befell the young couple, being assassinated on the very night of their wedding, the two nobles retained their alliance until the recent fall of the de Lerac Household. During the troubled times of the Red Fever and the three-year drought in Lerac that followed the Enque Incident with the Spire of Haustellum, Dorná served as a strong, and often harsh, voice of order, keeping the nobles in check, while providing for her population as best she could. Yet tensions rose dangerously in the County of Lerac. In the end, the Count was proclaimed not only corrupted by the Spires but also a traitor to his people with heretical connections to the druids of Braeonia. In a violent revolt, the Count was killed, the de Leracs were stripped of their titles and any surviving members or connected family were branded outlaws. Dorná was the first to grieve and when asked to assume the County, based on her connection through her daughter's short-lived marriage, she refused. Under the shadow of conflict among the baronies however, or, even worse, the looming threats of Elysses and Leona, as well as rulers north of the Sinia and even Braeons, Dorná took command of Lerac's forces and ensured that none would threaten its lands. Her de facto rule was followed by the title of Countess of Lerac as well, she was not, however, anointed Countess Palatine like her predecessor had been. To face the rulers of Leona and Elysses as an equal, and now controlling lands on both sides of the Sinia, Dorná, as daughter to a Margrave, united the two counties of Lerac and Rosmund and declared herself Marquise of Feranque.

While her claim was eventually ratified gaining a marginal support in the Conclave, her rule has only obstacles to look forward to. The Fire Drought has receded but its effects still plague her coffers and her people. She has so far survived no less than four assassination attempts, including one from the fabled Braeon Hunters of Ourovoros, while rumors rise which name her instigator of the revolt that brought the downfall of Philippe de Lerac and the lynching of the druid Diagach. Elysses still grinds its teeth at her title, supported by many who view this as a future claim to the Hollow Throne itself, for higher titles in Galania were held by members of the Imperial House. Her stance during Fredrik's trial, where she all but openly supported him, has turned on her the wrathful gaze of the Paeneticum, and the devout forces of Leona and its Herman connections along with it. At the same time, she suffers immense pressure to launch a pre-emptive strike against Haustellum in her lands, and who is to say such advice is not sound, considering Nepenthe?

Whether a shrewd politician or a caring ruler, Dorná protects her lands and people with zeal, equipped with a retinue of cunning financial advisors, the strong knightly tradition of Lerac and her own Gift in magic. She is seemingly not interested in expansion but has nevertheless risen from a self-exiled daughter of a fallen household to the first Marquise in Galania since the dissolution of the Empire. With every crisis she comes up against, the Shining Storm lives up to her name and raises questions as to what her next move will be.

Galania-Trans-Sania: People believe that there is a very simple reason why two of the three greatest powers of Galania are located so close to the borders of the province: their lands were cut in half by Imperial decree. Using the river Sinia as a convenient border, Charles II recognized

in the families of Saon and Lerac two potential rivals to the heirs of Armatellum. That is, at any rate, what the heirs to those families — at least those who survived — would claim to this day. The reality, however, was more complex.

There are at least two different reasons for the founding of this new province. The first was political: the southern Galtonni settlements had been literally conquered by Charles and his son, thus providing solid ground for them to include “King of Galans” to the Emperor’s Titles, by right of conquest. But the term “Galans” was not a clearly defined one and was often associated with the old Galtonni settlements, which, in turn, included almost half of today’s Galania-Trans-Sinia. To claim that such a huge expanse could be brought under a single royal crown would only alarm the rest of the nobility and shake the fledgling Empire to its core in its conception. By containing the sovereignty to a much more limited space — and one ruled by ready contenders to the Imperial Throne no less — Perrin disarmed them in a way that could be accepted by the rest of his vassals not simply as a proper claim, but as a shrewd political move as well.

The second reason was cultural. Unlike the Heartland settlements of Galania that had largely maintained their old Galtonni character and roots, the kingdoms beyond the Sinia had been founded by a mixture of peoples that, through the centuries, had begun to differentiate from their Heartland cousins. A combination of Hermanni, Galtonni and other tribes, such as the Tefts, the Berawe and the Pekhts, had settled these lands in equal measure, giving rise to a new culture that, while resembling others, was becoming clearly distinct, as was the dialect they were using. Many early Nord raiders had been assimilated by their population to this mix and, while their numbers were nowhere near those that Norvden would come to house, they were not few.

The true and most important reason for the forging of this new province, however, was financial. In the aftermath of Svarthgalm’s invasion, the north lay in shambles. Economies had been shattered; Nord raiders and monsters, stranded by the departure of their fleets, still roamed the lands, plaguing the roads as highwaymen and the villages as robbers. What’s more, the “scorched earth” tactic employed in the north by earl Rafalic to cut off the Nords from their ships and supplies ensured that the invasion army would leave nothing standing. Farmsteads were left without animals, grain houses emptied and gardens and crops subsumed and trampled. At the same time, an immense number of capable hands died in this prolonged war, while major castles and towns were barely left standing by the fires of the raiders. In short, much as the nobility of Galania would froth and rage about political ploys by the Emperors — and, to a certain degree, be right in their anger — the reality was that the needs of the lands across the Sinia were entirely different from those of the Heartlands. Forging a province that would dedicate itself to the restructure of an economy from the ground up made perfect administrative sense. The fact that the Sinia provided a convenient border was simply a very well exploited circumstance.

These dismal financial origins would leave the province gimped for centuries, despite the efforts of the Emperors. In fact, throughout history it became a point of friendly competition among

the Emperors to display their work in Galania-Trans-Sinia. Perrin would found the Temple of the Aspects in Vercy. While the Temple never acted as the center Theist cathedrals had become and eventually fell out of use, it did work as an attempt to lure working hands to the province, without, however, angering the Theists by founding a Deist cathedral in a rich city. Charles-Louis would found the Academia Naturalis in Burneux, the lead institution for the study of agriculture to this day, as well as the University of Pravia, now specializing in law studies and rhetoric. Otto I would turn the abandoned castle of Jugh into the lesser Chapter of the Quiet Water, far to the north among the swamped shores of the province. In his vanity, however, no one portrayed this competition more than Ludwig (or Louis) the Beautiful; he single-handedly transformed Vercy into the Garden City, turning the Temple of the Aspects into his personal summer estate, while using an extraordinary amount of funds to transfer and then magically sustain an immense conservatory, the largest greenhouse garden in the world, containing endless flower and plant species from around the world. This would drag the southern parts of the province into more refined company; but just as Vercy itself hides the decadent presence of the slums in its midst, so does its evolution hide the darker corners of the province.

Despite the efforts of Emperors, the reality remained through history that Galania-Trans-Sinia would always be limping behind the rest of the Kingdoms in terms of financial power. While they struggled to rebuild, other provinces built roads, established stations and ensured that those would be preferred for the transfer of goods. At the same time, their merchants would establish connections throughout the continent, which they, along with their rulers, would prove loath to relinquish. Lerac, Saon and later Leona, Broslaw, Engart and even the distant Velonest would outmaneuver the Sinians on every turn, effectively dominating the tariff laws over the province's own trade routes. When the province was ready to accommodate large ports and secure the transfer of goods, the largest trade houses had already established an elaborate network which was viciously protected by the Conclave. This left the province with an excellent opportunity, however: smuggling. Spending decades, if not centuries, in a poor financial state, the province had traditionally been plagued by bandits and outlaws. Today, the "diplomatic missions" that move in and out of Vercy at all times provide the perfect cover for enterprises that wish to avoid the usual routes and tariffs, thus finding a very accommodating alternative in the large province of Galania-Trans-Sinia. While much more limited in scope than popular trade routes, the practice had its merits; the many bandits and highwaymen of the province soon found a new occupation and a solid base of understanding with the local sovereigns.

So it was that Galania-Trans-Sinia, despite both its size and its location, was ignored by the trade alliances that were forged and in fact found extreme resistance at every corner; and thus, it was led to different methods for profit. In that sense, one could claim that it has never recovered from the Nord Invasion, despite the centuries that have passed since then and it is no coincidence that in such an expansive province only two major cities have risen, both of which were supported and funded by different Emperors. That, however, is not to say that the province remains poor or lawless. Far from it. Galania-Trans-Sinia is nothing but organized, self-

sustained and what it lacks in large cities it makes up for in almost three dozen castle-kingdoms — the most in any province. And each of those is heavily militarized and, perhaps most importantly, many of them house Order Priories.

Forgotten or ignored by the tumultuous political and financial games of the rest of the Kingdoms with the exception of Vercy, the Kings of the province had always retained an exemplary relationship with the Orders. In part, this is because of the Sword's sacrifice during the invasion; it has never been forgotten and, in fact, tradition dictates that Sword Brothers are always offered roof and shelter if so asked. But traditions aside, while right in the center of the Kingdoms, the Order Priories of Galania-Trans-Sinia avoid the attention they would draw in the Heartlands or the more politically active kingdoms, enjoying a much more tolerant environment than those offered where the nobility is less inclined to accept their interventions.

In return, the Orders have always assisted the local rulers, turning a blind eye to the less than savory enterprises of some. If the Orders of old had no issue with elevating brigand leaders to the position of Kings, then certainly today's would not object to the little… side-projects of the established ones. What the Orders did ensure, however, was that the local population would not suffer from the outlaws, and today some of the best trained militia forces in the Kingdoms can be found in the province. In time, the military experience of generations would become compact and small military schools would be formed. This eventually provided the foundation for the best and only major export of the province — Men-at-Arms. Rivaling even their province of origin, the Allerian Plains, Sinian professional soldiers are praised for their training and professionalism and can be found throughout the Kingdoms.

Character Portrait, King Fredrik of Brandengrad: *"You are entirely wrong, Baron. He is no cub. He is a promising leader and a great warrior, an exemplary noble of the new generation, which is why he will be not allowed to gather allies. In this historic moment, he cannot be a shining example for the nobility."*

Bishop Madheus of Riismark

King Fredrik is regarded as one of the most controversial personalities in the Hundred Kingdoms. While this is mainly the result his latest actions, which shook the Conclave and challenged the status quo of centuries, his own history and that of his House only provided fertile ground for further debate and speculation.

His childhood home was not a happy one. With his great-grandfather on the throne when he was born, relationships between generations were distant and corrupted. His grandfather was an angry and belittled man with violent outbursts and Fredrik's father all but ignored him. He insisted that his son be sent away from Brandengrad and indeed, despite his mother's protests, Fredrik was sent to the University of Pravia soon after his sixth birthday, visiting his home only rarely since.

As a learning child, he displayed exceptional intelligence, which was often overshadowed by his bon vivant pursuits once he reached his teens. His father's indifference soon turned to a dismissal of him and his "sinful ways"; his great grandfather, however, who still sat on the Throne, recognized both his potential and his need for discipline and Fredrik was sent to the Academia Proelia in Argem. While he also made a reputation for his lively times on leave, in the two years he spent there, his tutors and drillmasters discovered and cultivated his talent in combat, strategy and diplomacy. He never graduated; after all, few do. Instead, on his seventeenth birthday, he submitted himself to the sponsorship of Sir Ghart of Rottdorf for knighthood, reviving an old tradition that demanded a crown prince to serve as squire under a future vassal. He proved an excellent squire and earned his knighthood proper not long after.

His return to Brandengrad was far from cheerful. His mother had passed away, as had his grandfather, and yet still his great grandfather ruled. Fear loomed over the Household, the old-King's exceptional life-span and health unnerving even the most loyal barons of Brandengrad's Court. By leave of the King, Fredrik left almost immediately, to roam the Kingdom, learning his land and organizing drills for the military, while deteriorated alliances were shyly rekindled with gifts, talks and visits. Matters of the commoners, who the King had come to ignore for decades, were looked after, even if with some secrecy so as to avoid the Throne's reaction. During this time, Fredrik showed he had a solid grasp of diplomacy and military affairs both, while his people came to know him as a charismatic and often considerate ruler, even if one with a temper at times.

A little over two years after his return, his centenarian great grandfather finally passed and decades of oppressed whispers rose immediately. Rumors about the Spire of Nepenthe and the old King became common in court. Talks of a sorcerer or witch or monster visiting the Throne room at nights, performing unnatural rituals to prolong his tired life. Some evem claimed that the young Prince had to end his rule, for he had often been heard saying that roaming the Kingdom had taught him much about his great-grandfather's rule. Fredrik ignored the whispers but answered innuendos in his presence… harshly. His father, however, the newly crowned King Willem I, answered them by bringing a Bishop to Brandengrad, ordering the building of a new Cathedral for the Theist Church and proclaiming the Household's piety. Be it for that or other reasons, the relationship with his son deteriorated further, with fights and shouts echoing often in Court. Despite their differences however, or perhaps because of them, the King publicly recognized Fredrik's potential as a warrior and strategist, and never questioned or refused him his rights. He was appointed Margrave of Brandengrad, as tradition dictated for the Crown Prince, and was ordered to secure the borders. Taking his brother with him, Fredrik left the capital and his father's side. He sent word to his contacts from the Academia in Argem and bolstered his army's ranks with Imperial units, preparing for what he considered was inevitable. Indeed, about a year after that, Nepenthe attacked, leading Fredrik, his Kingdom and the entire world into a new era.

The Battle of Nepenthe made Fredrik the first commander to have faced the Spires in battle since before the Fall. His trial for the murder of Bishop Madheus of Riismark raised the matter of the Spires' activity in the Conclave. These earned Fredrik unlikely allies both within the Conclave and without, as well as the admiration of youthful nobility everywhere. At the same time, however, his deeds reignited old feuds between the nobility and the Theist Church, earning him the ire of the faithful, Sovereigns and commoners alike, and of those content with the status quo of centuries. He avoided an almost certain conviction for his crime solely because news arrived of his father's death, his ascendancy to the throne of Brandengrad raising him above the jurisdiction of the Conclave. He left immediately for his Kingdom carrying a vague decree from the Conclave, dictating that restitution towards the Paeneticum were expected of him. When he returned to Brandengrad, he was welcomed by the ruins of Vatsdam, risen tensions between the Eleven Thrones of Riismark, sightings of a Dweghom army marching through his land and the ever present threat of Nepenthe within his own borders.

Fredrik is known to have ever been an advocate of absolute authority. He preaches with deed and word that a monarch's rule must be supreme but to the benefit of the people. Now his convictions will be put to the test. His plan's partial success in Vatsdam may have secured some time and many, old allies of the Throne and new alike, have offered support. But his own land's resources are scarce and the outcome of a long-term war with Nepenthe uncertain. Some advocate a ceasefire, no matter the cost, others claim that expansion would secure the funds needed to fight this war, while others still plea for more allies to be called and favors to be asked. Surrounded by threats, political and religious enmities and a crisis unlike any in recent history, King Fredrik's next choices may decide more than his own fate or that of his people.

[Start reading the Nepenthe series here!]

Hunter Cadre: While the Imperial Throne of the Tellian Empire possessed the armed forces necessary to challenge any invaders to the newborn Empire, there were other, more insidious, threats. Rampaging monsters, subversive warlocks and witches and their ilk cannot be met with military might without incurring tremendous expense, both in human life and coin.

The death of more than one Imperial Huntsmaster during ill-conceived Hunts convinced the Throne that a piecemeal approach to this problem would not solve their issues. Their solution was simpler: bounties. Foes dangerous enough to attract the attention of the throne would have Imperial Bounties placed upon their heads. The colossal sums paid for these bounties were in direct relation to the danger involved in the hunt, but still represented only a fraction of the cost compared to a troop mobilization.

As a result, countless brave (or foolish) individuals rushed to their doom in an effort to collect on these bounties. Those that took a more measured and professional approach, forming teams, collecting information on the foe, and acquiring the right tools for the job naturally survived longer. Some even managed to collect more than one bounty and almost overnight the Hunter Cadre were born.

Much like a shadow follows an object, thus were the Hunters part of the Hundred Kingdoms themselves, in their long walk through history. Men and women of usually obscure origin, with impressive equipment and obvious training, sometimes even Gifted in magic, would appear in groups, pairs or even alone, in various instances. Accounts regarding Hunters can be found as early as 287 P.R., when a Hunter called Ishsa Hiemstam brought in chains the infamous Moibus the Mad, to be burned at the stake. In 354 P.R., a group of Hunters are part of the defense against the forces of Svarthgalm, assigned to disrupt the wild shamans of the Wastes and counter the Blooded forces, while an unknown Hunter was fighting side by side with the Order of the Sword against Svarthgalm himself. In 437 P.R., the head of the Beast of Chevaux is brought to the Count of Elysses by one Kelthix, who calls himself a Hunter of the Cadre. The list of such events is long and uninterrupted throughout the history of the Tellian Empire and the conclusion is simple: long before they were recognized as an organized group, these elite bounty hunters had already established their own traditions, training regimes and operating methods.

In 504 P.R., and despite the political unrest of the time, an almost unprecedented agreement was struck, between the Chamberlain representing the Imperial Throne, the Orders and both Theists and Deists. They recognized the Venati Quadris, Hunters Certified by the Four, a mercenary group of specialty agents that would work under the mantle of the Imperial Throne, within the specific mandate of hunting the monstrosities that plagued mankind and any mages, chapter or otherwise, whose use of their Gift did not lie within the established parameters of the Empire's Charters.

The recognition by all four major institutions of the time proves obvious and rare backing, both in terms of influence and of finances. Even during the days of the Dissolution, when the Noble Houses rushed to maim the corpse of the Empire, the disarmament of the Cadre was never even discussed, forgotten as an Imperial armed force and always perceived as a useful agency instead. Inevitably, this would work in the Cadre's favor. Many of the members of the Legion of Smoke sought refuge and employment in the ranks of the Cadre, boosting Hunter numbers to an unprecedented level. Soon, the obscure, small group of specialty agents would become, well, still obscure, but now an elite armed force, operating both on bounties but also as a mercenary group for those who could afford them.

Despite the obvious opportunity, the Chamberlain never tried to add the Cadre to his tools of pressure, respecting the independence of operation the Hunters always had. Perhaps he did not have to or, some claim, perhaps this is not entirely true. While the enigmatic Cadre remains politically neutral, true to their original creed of hunting down renegade and rogue mages as well as monstrosities that plague the lands, the sums they require from individual noble households for their services border on the ridiculous. At the same time, their long tradition of cooperating with Imperial troops allows them to coordinate seamlessly in combat and the Cadre itself seems to favor working under the command of those who truly know how to utilize them. Now, as the world descends into chaos, with all manner of enemies challenging the might of the

Kingdoms, the Cadre has chosen to heed the call. Equipped with their highly advanced crossbows, any number of poisons and acids, a variety of weapons and lesser magical heirlooms to fit all circumstances, the Hunter Cadre will be found where it is needed and do what needs to be done.

Old Faith and New Faith:

Primordial Patterns

by Benjamin Tok and A.R.

Chapter 3: Old Faith and New Faiths

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Already during the centuries of chaos which preceded Hazlia's Fall, many were those who spoke of the sin of man. With the Old Dominion being a pure and undisputed theocracy, the political crisis that was spawned by Hazlia's absence after the Last Crusade was, by extension, also a crisis of faith. Coupled with the continuous declarations of Holy Wars, this not only caused fragmentation of the Dominion's society, but also allowed for ideas which deviated from the established dogma to flourish. Whether the motives were spiritual or political, in order to challenge the hierarchy one had to question the faith itself. This was one of the many reasons for which the Legions were forbidden from practicing any form of official worship – a mandate that was loosely enforced at best, as military appointments fell on the upper echelons of the Theocracy.

The ideas behind these emerging heterodoxies were many and differed vastly at that point, often driven more by circumstance than by a wish to reach a new Truth. All the same, an understandable pattern could be discerned: the Allfather's absence could only mean the failure of man and this, of course, not only included but mainly referred to holders of high offices in the hierarchy of the theocracy, including the Caelesors. Already at that time, some much more timid voices spoke of the failure of God instead, but those were usually quickly silenced. The citizens of the Old Dominion were, after all, a god-fearing people.

Thus, while a great majority of the refugees that left the Old Dominion were trying to escape the chaos and violence that threatened their lives or had destroyed their properties, many were those that simply had to leave, hunted by the theocracy for their heretical suggestions. As the lines between state, religion and army were blurred for so long, especially during the Galtonni wave, many were the officers of the disbanded legions, ranging from legati and strategoi to centurions and legionnaires, that had to escape prosecution for their beliefs. One must remember, however, that by that time most of the people had never witnessed the glory of Hazlia and his Pantheon as their ancestors had. Their perception of religion lay closer to mismanagement and violence than it did to guidance, protection and inspiration. The deconstruction of their society would lead many to challenge the authority of religion over their lives. Thus, among the populations of the refugee groups, most, once faithful, minds were

questioning their beliefs, while the words of the few fervent preachers were largely ignored at first, if not silenced by force. No one, after all, wished to hear that they were responsible for their misfortunes, simply because they did not believe enough.

Eventually, however, some of those preachers evolved to fill more traditional duties of priests almost by necessity, as people would turn to them for practical matters of a ritualistic nature, like the performance of ceremonies such as weddings or funerals. In time, and as the desperation of their situation and the fear of the unknown would grow, the refugees would turn to these preachers for spiritual guidance and support. By that time, the two common messages those zealous speakers delivered were simple: “the hierocracy has guided us astray from god and we, having chosen to escape their decadence, must repent for following them.” From these early preachers among the refugees, the first Apostles of the Theist Church would later be drawn, while many a faithful soldier who safeguarded their group from the perils of the journey would be elevated to Sainthood posthumously.

Once the Bounty was reached, such preachers would come to roam the settlements, performing the same ritualistic duties that they had during the long journey west. In an attempt to elevate their own prestige but also to provide some sense of stability, some leaders would invite them to stay in their courts permanently and the first timid connections to nobility began to be forged. In the Second Assembly of nobles, priests were brought along or sometimes invited so long as they were also leaders of groups. If there were something the Assembly revealed, however, it was two things. The first was that the ghost of a divine mandate behind leadership still lingered in the memories of the Dominion’s refugees and, while that memory was probably bitter and distrustful, the connection was there. The greatest revelation, however, that the priests got from the Assembly was that as individuals they had very little influence and for the first time discussions were taking place about the meaning of the Fall. However, since many of them were too attached to their own ideas and the previous dogma of the Theocracy, it would take a new generation of preachers for those discussions to bear fruit. By the mid-first century after the Fall, these preachers would show some signs of cooperation; efforts were made to amass faithful congregations and their teachings displayed much greater similarities than those of their predecessors, concentrating on a central message of mankind’s failure in the eyes of god. At the same time, they displayed an increasing attachment to the seats of power, with priests frequently found in courts as representatives of their flocks.

The arrival of the Orders saw those efforts thwarted. As much as the Orders originally shied away from any settlement’s inner politics, their involvement always came with a stipulation concerning the absence of priests and worship from the councils of administration. Shunned by the seats of power, the preachers turned to the public for support in a much more coordinated manner. In their campaign, they spoke of one god, for whom the name Theos spread fast. In their hubris, the corrupt leadership of mankind tried to elevate themselves to the Heavens, attempting to replicate the divine power of miracles. The instrument of their blasphemy was magic, an unnatural condition manifesting in souls that are not attuned to the divine balance of

Theos. To shield mankind from its own profanity, Theos' own Champion cast Himself down from heaven, destroying the blasphemers. It was that sacrifice which mankind had to honor, this crime which demanded penance, this hubris for which humanity had to atone.

While this early obsession with magic would in time be forced to the sidelines of the Theist Faith, at the time fear and hate towards magic spread and scattered witch burnings occurred, but the Orders swiftly and aggressively put an end to such practices as well as to many of their instigators. From the perspective of the Orders, however, the very fact that they had to intervene underlined that the influence of these preachers and their teachings proved much more widespread and influential than they had thought until then, while their own initial, violent reaction alienated many. At a later time, a new response to this rising faith was offered.

Heralded by one Rosmun Ludhus, a new, sidelined paradigm began spreading during the ninth decade P.R.: it was never mankind that Fell, it was only an aspect of God for divinity itself is not infallible. Deus, who was above perception, could not be put in one form or be worshipped in one manner. The betterment of each of the faithful was a duty to the divine for He was part of everything, and the people were part of him. He was to be approached by each in their own way, worshipping the Aspect, the fraction of the absolute existence which is god, which is closest to one's own understanding, and strive for perfection in that aspect. This faith, which was stripped of heavy ritualism and moved far from the perception of a few chosen and concentrated more on each person's connection to the divine, would in time resonate to the common people.

With the above in mind, two questions can be asked. Considering the theosophical debates that consumed the Old Dominion during the centuries of the Fall, can it really seem so surprising that the Anointed, each expressing entirely different aspects and time periods of Hazlia's worship, do not coexist in harmony but rather war and bicker about the Will of their god? As an extension of that question, and considering the repetition of this pattern, one could possibly even argue that such debates are indeed *part* of Hazlia's worship, that the God himself is ever changing or, at least, pulled by worship in so many different directions.

At the same time, however, considering the roots of modern Theism, was the appearance of Deism and their fragmenting dogma such an unforeseeable event, or could it mirror the patterns of the past? Are humanity and divinity alike bound to repeat past mistakes? In many ways, while not worshipping Hazlia, the Theist Church is the distant spiritual successor of the Old Dominion's Theocracy, with its earliest teachings and its ritualism heavily influenced by the old worship practices. With that in mind, Deism could be seen as a planned and channeled avenue for the fragmentation that worshiping an absolute had historically led to. Based on that, many see the intellect of the Orders behind the Deist movement and point to their tolerance towards Rosmun and his followers. Indeed, there are many indications that the Orders would not only allow the early Deists to preach freely, but also supported and provided escorts as they moved from one settlement to the next.

While the generally accepted motive behind this support was political in its nature, with the Orders trying to stifle the newly fledged Church, one must not dismiss a greater purpose: distancing humanity from even the most remote aspects of Hazlia worship. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the end it was in the Skeptics that the Orders truly pledged their allegiance. Born out of the mistrust towards the Divine caused by the Fall, the Skeptics doubted not simply the need for religion, but the very absolute nature of the divine. According to them, gods were entities of an elevated power, rather than superior existences of an entirely different nature than the rest of the universe. Therefore, by default, worshipping them served them alone; never the worshipper.

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The Lodge of Avon: It is said that all good legends of bravery and heroism must have castles. Ivan Golden-Hands, Entaddi the Obsidian Shield, Lance of the Lake, Gavin the Pure, Pale Rolf and Wilhelm of the Golden Spur, Tancred of the Lily, Tristné the Minstrel Knight, Sayf the Curved Blade… Search all such tales and each will invariably lead one to the same place: the Lodge of Avon.

Originally named River's End, this small island, situated on the bay of Argem, once housed a simple garrison, guarding the port of the city and the entrance to one of the many rivers of the Aust's delta. Its importance, however, would lie with the Birth of the Empire, which elevated the island to legend, housing the Lodge of Avon, where the Pledge of the Orders was held and the origin of legends would find a nursing home.

At the end of the Red Years, the Orders were all but despised by most of the population of the Kingdoms; were it not for the self-sacrifice of the Order of the Sword against the Nord invasion and the tireless efforts of the Order of the Shield, their end would have perhaps been an inevitability. But based on such heroic deeds, Charles Armatellum would find the basis for their resurrection in the eyes of the people. In his speech before his fabled Trial to rejoin their ranks, Charles Armatellum portrayed the Orders in their core as a brotherhood of Knights, the first to exist and the proud heritage of the fabled XIIth Legion. Their mission, he claimed, was still the same as that of the legendary Legion: to safeguard humanity against all which threatened its existence or civilization. The knights of the Orders throughout the ages, the father of the Empire claimed, were heroes — but heroes are ultimately human, flawed and erring. His speech ended with his pledge, a chivalric oath he took before everyone, vowing that his mission as a member of the Orders would remain the protection of the people.

Many, particularly nobles who disliked the vagueness of the Pledge — as well as the dedication to "the people" — voiced that this was an empty gesture, a stunt to divert their attention from the crimes of the Orders during the Red Years. Once he rose to the position of Grand Master, Charles' response was as swift as it was misleading; in memory of his own pledge, he drafted the Pledge of the Orders, pressuring all Order Grand Masters to sign the same chivalric oath he had taken. To monitor the actions of their Knights, the Orders would form a council that would

act as tribunal, held publicly, against members that acted contrary to the Pledge, while the Order of the Shield — perhaps the sole Order that had retained the admiration of the people during the Red Years — would act as agents and enforcers. Under the moniker of the Round Table, this council would convene every year and judge cases against Order members. To house this tribunal, the Lodge of Avon was founded.

The Lodge of Avon was a simple but imposing building to begin with, but during the years of the Empire, the island flourished. In time, the Lodge expanded to house quarters for all the Orders, until it became a jewel of architecture which combined the splendor of temples with the strength and majesty of castles. Under the central dome lied the Round Table, with the Pledge of the Orders inscribed across its stone edges, and from the main building different wings were erected in time, each dedicated to a different Order. Its regent was the Grand Master of the Shield and, in fact, it became the de facto headquarters for the Order, to the extent that those seeking the aid of their Knights Errant would send petitions or even travel to Avon from all corners of the Empire. Every five years, the island would explode with life, as knights, warriors and commoners alike would come from all over the Empire for the Challenges, the realization of Charles' promise to open the Orders to all. During those times, members of the Orders would gather in numbers, while an army of vendors, participants and spectators would set up stalls and tents in such numbers that the shores across Avon would effectively host an entire city. For an entire fortnight, banners, songs and fires turned the brutal tourneys, games and sparring contests into a celebration of not just the victors that gained an invitation to the different Orders but of the Empire itself.

Many bards keep this ideal memory of Avon in their songs and, to an extent, they are perhaps right to do so; in its inception, the Lodge reflected the best that the Orders had to offer and the peak of their relationship with the Kingdoms and their people. Painters had time and again captured and expanded on the majesty of the Lodge at the time of the Empire, portraying its towers almost ethereal in the morning mist, with a sea of banners and coats-of-arms dancing before the magnificent fortress. But bardic tales and the imagination of artists usually forget the true purpose of the Lodge. Even at the peak of its glory, the Round Table was a court-martial first and foremost and it proved Charles' words to be true time and again; the knights of the Orders were human, flawed and erring. Among shining examples like Tristné the Minstrel Knight or Gavin the Pure were the likes of Rolf the Cruel, the Bloody Marshal or Anton the Hooded Judge. Bards do not recite the crimes committed by knights in their tales and from the shores across Avon the artists could not see the gallows or the bodies of knights swinging in the wind.

The dissolution of the Empire brought a rapid decline to the majesty of the isle. Not only were the Pledge and the Round Table all but forgotten, but the retraction of the Lex Talionis meant that the Order of the Shield had to effectively abandon the Lodge; were it not for the misdirecting efforts of Chamberlains, the island itself would have been lost to all Orders. Despite that, however, today Avon is all but deserted, inhabited by a small and mostly ceremonial garrison of honorary squires and pages of the Shield — hiding behind the moniker of "Knights of

the Lodge" — while it sometimes serves as a resting station and meeting place for wandering knights. This still changes, however, every five years, for the Challenges were never stopped. Inspired by the "Excellences" of the City States, for a fortnight ending at Hero's Eve (mid-summer), a day of remembrance for the fallen, the dead heroes of humanity are honored and Avon flourishes with life as the grandest chivalric competition of the Kingdoms takes place, with events ranging from jousting tournaments to a mock mass combat. This combat, called the Baptism, is the peak of the Challenges and allows anyone with padded armor and wooden weapons to participate. Those, commoners and nobles alike, who distinguish themselves during the Baptism are greatly honored by their peers and the event itself serves as scouting grounds for the Orders but also individual knights in search of squires.

Riismark: The prevailing theory among most from the rest of the Hundred Kingdoms is that "Riis" derives from "Russ" and that Riismark was originally settled by a Russ kin group. That is why, many claim, they call themselves Markmen instead, trying to distance themselves from the Principalities. This claim, however, the Markmen dismiss readily, claiming that Riis is in fact an old word for "rivers." Riismark is the land of the Riverking, the legendary first King of the land who founded all eleven Kingdoms, and there is no love lost between the Russ and themselves. Historically, they are both wrong. The Markmen are in fact a Hermannic kin group and Riis is actually a degenerative word form of Reis, the Hermannic word for "rice," one of Riismark's earliest produces.

If ever there was a historical person behind the persona of the Riverking, he has long been forgotten, buried under layer upon layer of legendry. The more mundane reality is that the Riverking was but another King Without Court, or possibly there were several of them, trying to escape the influence and control of the Orders in the Heartlands. The prevailing theory is that Riismark was settled late or at least later than the battle of Yenik in 134 P.R. and it was a desperate choice that the settlers were forced into since the way east was blocked by the Russ. Historians base this assumption on the fact that the land must have looked very unappealing for settlement, filled with uninviting swamps and muddy ground, usually too wet and soft for the limited techniques of agriculture practiced at the time. It is perhaps for this reason that one of the fabled deeds of the Riverking was tricking the Brown Wyrm, Branschlange — the Riverking's main antagonist — into giving him rice. Notoriously tolerant to being grown in submerged fields, rice has always been produced and consumed in Riismark and proved paramount to the early successful settlement of the land. In fact, some historians claim, the very term "Riverking" is a wrongly translated term for Reiskönig or "Rice King" — possibly a nickname for one or many of Riismark's early sovereigns.

While rice ensured the survival of those early settlers and even allowed the kings of the land to engage in modest trade with outsiders, Riismark would develop later in history, once much agricultural knowledge that had been lost after the Fall was remembered or reinvented. Finally, the rich soil of Riismark could be exploited by other things than almost exclusively rice. This allowed for proper castle-kingdoms to develop, following an evolution parallel — if a little

slower — to those of the Heartlands. True to their legends of the Riverking and his Eleven Heirs, eleven castle-kings have dominated the political landscape of the province, vying for land and influence over the fields and rivers.

The true strength and source of riches of Riismark would come later, with the discovery of rich iron veins lying under the mud and even of modest veins of gold. All of a sudden, the entire province changed. While the rivers had always been deemed important and most castle-kings had raised their castles in strategic positions in order to oversee them, the increased need of trade routes saw extensive works being done. Since traditional roads proved impractical to pave and difficult to maintain, many rivers were widened at places, to ensure that large barges carrying raw materials could safely navigate them. To ensure control over the water-ways, most kingdoms forged gigantic chains from local steel to forcefully monitor and tax all movement in their rivers. Such chains are not only raised near the ports of the kingdoms' castles but have in fact been placed on nearly every river junction to ensure that the quantities of goods are monitored multiple times, thus limiting smuggling. This has made Riismark Steel famously expensive; but its quality more than makes up for the elevated price.

This explosion changed how the entire world viewed Riismark; from an ignored island in a sea of Kingdoms surrounding it, Riismark was coveted by Russ and Kingdoms alike, almost overnight. If either expected the long-feuding castle-kings to be swayed or conquered easily, however, they were sorely disappointed. Long left to their own devices, the Markmen had developed their own culture and identity and, in the face of outsiders, their Kings were ready to defend it — along with their mines. The Alliance of the Eleven Steel Thrones, fueled by the myth of the Riverking and his Eleven Heirs, became the stuff of new legends, for Markmen and foreigners alike. Despite their efforts, however, they were sure to eventually fall, as the Russ Princes proved ready to throw all they had in order to lay claim over the land and its metals. The only thing that stopped them was the Eleven bending the knee to Charles II. They did so under one condition; Riismark would become a single province, with well-defined borders. In return, the Emperor's Legions would buy Riismark Iron and Steel at significantly lower prices.

While the eleven castle-kings have never well and truly been at peace, with always some of them at least battling over land or control of the rivers, Riismark sovereigns retained a strong cooperation before outside threats, and its people have forged a strong sense of common identity — they are, in fact, one of the most recognized cultural groups of the modern Kingdoms. Markmen consider themselves divided into two peoples: the Riismen, those generally living in the castle-towns and chain stations on the rivers, and the Markeni, those generally living near the fields or the mine towns. But even for them, such distinctions hold little significance in the grand scheme of things.

The Red Years – Part 1:

Part 1: The Murder of Saint Nikolas

Of the tumultuous past of the Kingdoms, one period stands out as the most violent, chaotic and, eventually, the most defining: the Red Years. The culmination of over two centuries of struggles, oppression, infighting and political tension between the Nobles, the Orders and the Theist Church, few escaped the decade of violence that reigned over the Kingdoms' basin, be they noble, soldier or commoner. The only ones who did not care for the events and riots of the Red Years, were those suffering the Nord invasion of Svarthgalm, who, supported by the chaos, reached the Heartlands.

To understand the Red Years, one must understand, even if superficially, the status quo of the Kingdoms' basin in the middle of the third century Post Ruinam. The Orders were struggling to maintain some semblance of control over the rapidly increasing population and kingdoms. While the Order of the Sealed Temple remained the single most powerful financial power, their near absolute control over precious metals had long been lost, as new mines had been founded and trade routes to the City States were shyly being established. With the golden touch losing its weight, the threat of steel force was adopted once more; an often-hollow threat, as the Orders were rapidly losing the numbers game when it came to martial might. The Nobility, loathing the constant pressure applied by the Orders, had turned to Divine Right as their source of power, with the rising Theist Church capitalizing on its symbiotic relation as often as they could, ever trying to push for more influence and control over the political scene. And, in the meantime, the population under these giants, was expected to work, fight and die, on the whim of their masters, with no say or influence and struggling to make ends meet. Peace, where it existed, was being kept by a single string – and the tension ever rose, as the weight of its load ever increased.

But no matter the political and societal background, which readily provided a fertile ground, waiting to be watered in crimson, the heart of the Red Years beat along the heart of a single man: Saint Nikolas.

Even as the Theist Church constantly expanded its influence, especially among the nobility, there were those among its numbers that had not forgotten the practices of the Apostles of old. Roaming from village to village, such preachers would become a sight less and less frequent the more the Church became an established powerhouse. And yet, it was through those few preachers that the Theist Church managed to re-approach the lay people, and none did more in that regard than Nikolas, an orphan of Argem raised by the nuns of a local monastery.

For the greatest part of his life, Nikolas would remain at the lowest echelons of the Theist clergy, indifferent to the political power plays of his peers. Penniless and supported solely by the charity of parishes, Nikolas' preaching would nevertheless prove more effective than any sermon delivered in a Cathedral. If the "Vitae Sanctorum" of the Theist Church was to be believed, Nikolas visited over four hundred cities and villages, preaching, attending to the sick and even performing small miracles to the benefit of the people. Even among Deists, he would come to be viewed potentially as an Aspect, for some of the Wanderer, for others of the Father or, later, of the Victim.

In 256 P.R. he finally settled in Braws at the invitation of the aged Arch-Bishop Victus. There he was offered his own chapel to preach, while the Arch-Bishop himself would often allow him to deliver the Sondum sermon in the city's cathedral in his stead. In 261 P.R., he was ordained as a Bishop, a station he kept for less than three years, for after the passing of Victus in 264 P.R., Nikolas was unanimously elected to replace him – some said, at the behest of King Angus of Braws himself. Such rumors may well have held merit, for eight months after that, King Angus himself passed away without an heir of age. Rather than see the Orders assume de facto control of his city, Angus named Nikolas as his kingdom's regent; a man who the King knew enjoyed the love of his people and one the Orders would have difficulty controlling or replacing. In a sense, he was wrong. The Order of the Sealed Temple reacted immediately, approaching Nikolas before the ceremony of his regency coronation and demanding he stepped down, as a man of the cloth should not be involved in the politics of a Kingdom. His response was as adamant as his preaching. In his speech during the ceremony, Nikolas spoke of power hungry, scheming organizations, whose obscure beliefs and heretical rituals offered demonic powers to mere mortals, threatening with excommunication all those who performed such practices. In a mockery of a trial, the Sealed Temple tried and executed the Arch-Bishop for assuming regency while a member of the clergy. But while Angus had been proven wrong about how the Orders could not remove Nikolas from his regency, he was absolutely right about the love of the people he had enjoyed.

To this day, every person, from the most powerful King to the simplest farmer in the furthest corner of the Kingdoms, knows all there is to know about the Murder of Saint Nikolas. Afraid of his teachings and the loss of their influence, the Order of the Sealed Temple tried and executed the good Bishop Nikolas, regent of Braws. But did they?

Few today know the events of that day as they truly happened, although this is neither a conspiracy nor some well-hidden secret and the core truth remains the same. It is a simple misunderstanding of events that both the Church and the Sealed Temple have allowed to continue unfettered until history, by and large, simply forgot the semantics of the truth. Yes, the Templars did arrest Regent Nikolas, even though they were neither a recognized authority nor an accepted influence in Braws at the time. Yes, they did put him on trial; by themselves, these two actions were far beyond their station, and they could have eventually spiraled into riots and perhaps another version of the Red Years. But their blades never claimed the Bishop's life. In a public trial, surrounded by Brothers Militant of the Sealed Temple, it was a handful of members of the Order of Saint Lazarus that burst into the scene, walked purposefully to the Bishop and claimed his life, ignoring the proceedings, the outburst of the audience and even their brothers from the Sealed Temple.

The "why?" of the crime has never been confirmed; the Lazarenes are not the most open and talkative of the Orders, much less so apologetic about their actions, while their motives are obscure at best. Usually, however, the targets of their wrath are cruel individuals, be they nobles, clergy or even criminals, that plague on the weak and discarded. While some Order

supporters are ready to dispute that, their accusations seem to be based solely on the act itself. The Lazarenes would not kill a man, lest he was such a man. But the known facts challenge that dogmatic approach. Bishop Nikolas did not fit the description of the Lazarenes' usual enemies, period. But, some claim, many of his backers did. Using the good preacher as a veil to hide their misdeeds, many were those that capitalized on the man's virtue to open doors of power, influence and wealth. Rip that veil and their nature is exposed, while a very definite ultimatum is delivered: if their unwitting protector can be murdered, what fate would await them? If that were truly the case behind their motives, then the good bishop's only crime was naïve innocence.

Regardless of the Lazarenes' motive, however, the fact remains that the Templars did nothing to prevent them from killing the Bishop and, in fact, escorted them out of Braws, shielding them from the enraged population; even if some claim that they were, in fact, shielding the enraged population from them.

In the end, it matters little. Whether by action or inaction, the Templars shared part of the burden of the Bishop's murder and the distinctions between Orders did not (and often do not) register in the eyes of the population. The people – and History – would forever attribute this crime to the Order of the Sealed Temple. Hours after the execution, an enraged mob would assault the Sealed Temple priory of Braws, calling them murderers while they attempted to set fire to the building. The violent response of the Order would ignite riots throughout the city, as individual knights and brothers of the Order were chased out of Braws at best, lynched at worst.

The first spark had been lit.

The Red Years – Part 2:

The Nord Invasion and Fertile, Bloodied Ground

Following the events of Braws, word would spread to neighboring cities and eventually throughout the lands of the Kingdoms, fueled by the Church and the Nobility, which were finally equipped with ammunition about the Orders' crimes against the will of the people and even Divine Authority. Arch-Bishop Nikolas was soon canonized as a Martyr Saint, driving the population into a near-frenzy against the Orders. Immediately the nobility attempted to use this as leverage against the Orders, subtly igniting riots in an attempt to oust the Orders from their Kingdoms. In the end, however, their tactic backfired spectacularly. The tension of decades of increased oppression and constant warfare had finally received an outlet, and the lay people of the Kingdoms would as soon turn against the enforcers of the local nobility as they would against the brothers of any Order. At the same time, Deist believers who the Church had silenced in its areas of influence rebelled against their oppressors, protecting their gatherings with force if need arose. While the riots would eventually stop, the chaos did not. With social structure, divine dogma and the might of the Orders in question, war followed on a scale unlike before. Weakened Kingdoms were prowled upon by their neighbors, only for the chaos and

social disorder to spread unto them, perpetuating a cycle of ruthless ambition, violent pretenders and enraged populations.

Such was the chaos, that records of the time are considered falsified and unreliable, while most events were too limited in their influence and too numerous to be recorded properly. Many are the modern nobles that conveniently forget how their houses came to existence through the violence. Many more are those houses that are simply forgotten, stripped of land and titles or even completely erased since the Red Years. But in the end, the existential threats of the fledgling civilization, came as much from without as it did from within. And in the north, the Nords were ready to punish the southerners for their transgressions against their ancestors. Whether deliberately or by a twist of fate, the northern shores had suffered an escalation of Nord activity, with raids increasing every year and entire areas being delivered to steel and fire, only to be settled by the invaders.

With the Murder of Saint Nikolas, therefore, the Orders had almost single-handedly led the Kingdoms into over a decade of riots, violence and warfare. In the wake of such chaos, all but the Order of the Sword and some Knights-Errant of the Shield decided to withdraw from the Northern front against the Nords, in an attempt to bring back a semblance of order and peace, as well as try to safeguard their assets, when that failed. While perhaps understandable, this would only deteriorate the situation on all fronts. In the Allerian Plains, a coalition of City States led by the rising power of Tauria, would attempt to expand their influence, by sword and spear, marching ever to the north and even reaching the southernmost shores of the Bounty. Meanwhile, in the North, the Nords were whipped into a proper army and led personally by the Einherjar Svarthgalm, called Darkcry, Steelbreaker, Scythe-of-Men and a dozen other names. His eyes were set on the Bounty and without the Orders to oppose him, he seemed unstoppable.

While the Nords pushed deeper south, Rafalic, an Earl and bannerman of Hand – today's Hanse – turned to the "scorched earth" tactic. Poisoning wells, burning crops and putting granaries to the torch all along the Nord supply lines, he completely cut them off from their ships, crippling their ability to resupply and maintain their army, while trapping them in the depths of Kingdom territory. Forced by Rafalic, the Nords attempted to cross the Gaulan river, attacking Vaanburg… only to find a force led by the Orders of the Sword waiting. But while the siege was ongoing, the Order of the Sword launched a surprise attack outside the walls, aiming at killing Svarthgalm and removing the head of the Nord army.

It was a daring plan, one desperate enough to portray the strength of the Nord army. But for all its bravery, the plan backfired. During the Sword's attack, one of Svarthgalm's sons was killed and rather than break the spirit of the Nords, the assault infuriated both the Einherjar and his people. With reckless abandon, the main army fell once more upon the walls of Vaanburg. Svarthgalm and his chosen, however, ignored the attack and chased the Order of the Sword, whose knights never managed to reenter Vaanburg and had been pushed south of the river. Soon, stalled by the efforts of the city's defenders, the main army would follow them, ignoring strategy and fueled solely by their thirst for revenge.

Nothing escaped the rage of the Nord army, as they carved a bloody and fiery path through the lands of the old Galtonni settlements, from Vaanburg all the way to the city of Beurn, which they nearly leveled. Realizing the destruction that the chase was causing, the Order of the Sword sent a handful of riders to the South, in order to raise an army and alert the Kingdoms of the Heartlands. The bulk of their Order, however, remained and changed tactics; with the help of locals and Knights-Errant of the Shield, they lured their chasers into tight passages and tried to hold them as much as possible, before retreating. If the Nords ignored them in order to raid and secure provisions, they would attack the raiders or perform surprise attacks on the main army, only for the cycle to be repeated once the Nords were forced to turn their attention to them. While the dozens of remaining Knights and the few hundreds of Brothers were not enough to cause real damage, much less achieve any proper victory, their tactic worked. Frequently strengthened by local forces led by Knights-Errant, the hit and run maneuvers stalled the Nord advance and while it was never really stopped, the main army was delayed for over a month, as the first rains of Autumn started falling. Eventually, however, Vercy would fall too, and the Order of the Sword would be forced to retreat even more to the South, eyeing the river Sinia as the site for a last, desperate attempt to halt the invaders there before the Winter.

In 274 P.R., exhausted and with its numbers crippled, the Order of the Sword made a stand on the bridge of Corbeauvoix. What would have happened if they had not, would become one of the greatest “ifs” in the history of the Hundred Kingdoms. But stand they did, barely more than a hundred knights and brothers along with a few hundred half-trained forces from neighboring villages, led by a handful of Knights-Errant of the Shield, holding the bridge for two days and fighting battle upon battle, without rest. The last battle, skalds and bards would later claim, lasted for a full day and night, with the few remaining Knights holding the line against the army of Svarthgalm, while the Einherjar himself was wounded, some claimed mortally so. The Sword’s sacrifice was immense, crippling the Order for centuries, but it was not in vain. On the third day, a young King by the name of Charles Martell, having interrupted his campaign conquering Austersia and southern Galania, brought his army to the aid of the Order. At the end of the battle that followed, the dead were so many on both sides that it is said that the ceasefire which was decided between Charles and the hooded speaker of the Nords happened in shadow, the sun hidden behind the sheer number of crows circling the battlefield.

It would perhaps be fitting, inspiring even, if the Battle of Corbeauvoix had signaled the end of the Red Years. Alas, it was not so. While the herald of their end would be brought to the forefront, the name of Charles whispered with admiration by people all over the Kingdoms, it would take five more years of bloodshed before this painful period of history would come to an end. Oblivious, even indifferent, to the plights of the heartlands, the rest of the Kingdoms remained in bloody turmoil, with the other Orders struggling to keep things in check and having, for the first time since the Murder of Saint Nikolas, some indirect success. With its attention refocused and its finances having received blow after blow, the Order of the Sealed Temple would start leveraging nobles through outstanding loans.

This, however, would not be tolerated. In 277 P.R., pressured and supported by nobles all around the Kingdoms, the Holy Father issued a bull, the “Nihil Latet Sub Solem”. Calling for nothing to remain hidden under the Sun, the words of Nikolas were remembered, condemning those who hid their heretical practices. While few commoners dared turn their wrath against the Orders, witch hunts began anew; riots were sparked once more, with burning and lynching becoming a regular occurrence in every corner of the Kingdoms. Many nobles saw this as an opportunity to escape the influence of the Church and the Orders alike, while others would doubt their very sovereigns, because of the support received by either the Church or the Orders. For the first time, the former Brothers Militant of various Orders who had formed the “Crimson Band” mercenary army became extremely active, taking on contracts for pittance or simply involving themselves without invitation, ending endless conflicts with brutal efficiency and en masse, only for their interventions to spark new ones as often as not.

In many ways, the last few years of the Red Years would be the crescendo of their violence and the bloodied soil of the Kingdoms would be grimly fertile for the change that was about to come. For while the rest of the Kingdoms burned, the core of the heartlands was being changed, united under one banner and one name: Charles Armatellum.

2. Old Dominion

Introduction: A common misconception amongst modern historians and their students is that the title of Dominion refers to the Dominion of Man. It most certainly does not. The original inhabitants referred instead to the Dominion of Hazlia, the Pantokrator, God of Mankind. And with his Fall the Dominion ended – but did not die.

Far to the east of the Hundred Kingdoms, past the Claustrine Mountains and the desert wasteland beyond it, lie the heartlands of the old Dominion. Once a continent-spanning power, the legions of the old Dominion were powerful enough to threaten even the elder races of the Dweghom and the Spires into acquiescence, or at least a semblance of it.

Past the once teeming valleys and fertile plains of the Heartlands lie the river valleys upon which Capitas, the greatest city of humanity ever built, was founded. And it is here, amongst the ruins of the holiest of cities of man that the remnants of Hazlia fell.

Wounded unto death, but immortal and driven to a towering rage by the betrayal of his subjects, Hazlia was pushed beyond the limits of despair and rage. In his hubris he sought to end the Old Dominion but was foiled by the sacrifice of another member of the Pantheon: Ninuah, the Mother.

Denied, broken and driven well past the edge of madness, Hazlia reached out to whatever power could answer his desperate need to avenge himself and punish his betrayal… and one answered. Death, the third Incarnate Soul of Destruction, had been bound beyond the reach of any being, living or dead, but Hazlia now stood in the threshold of both and could hear his call. Bending all his divine might, Hazlia was able to carve his way into Death's prison as he Fell.

What happened within that forsaken realm is beyond the understanding of mortals and immortals alike but from the unholy fusion of those two polar Primordial elements an unholy amalgam was born: Undeath.

Animate but unalive, aware but un-souled, a new Primordial paradigm was born. Its rage-filled birth cry infused the thousands upon thousands of dead in Capitas and the Old Dominion beyond with a fraction of his essence granting them a ghastly unlife. The spiritual connection the deceased had with Hazlia made this transfer not just possible but remarkably easy. In fact, this birth cry was so powerful and uncontrollable that Hazlia poured too much of his essence into it, becoming little more than a single directive that lived within each of his undead creations: slay the living.

Almost no records of the butchery that followed exist outside of the most secret vaults of the Order of the Ashen Dawn. What little knowledge of this period exists is embedded into the dark myths and legends of the Rus, the last of mankind to flee the Old Dominion and cross the Claustrine Range to freedom. They alone, amongst all the remnants of mankind, were forced to

face the untrammeled horror of Hazlia's rage and despair made manifest and their myths, legends and cultural outlook reflect this.

Through the selfless sacrifice of the Last Legion and the last remaining god of the Triumvirate, Cleon, Hazlia's horde was defeated but a primordial power as old and vast as a Horseman, even a corrupted one, cannot be defeated, merely contained.

And so it was that Hazlia's power and his Will were severed. What the legion did with his Will remains the single most closely guarded secret of mankind, but his power has raged unchecked for centuries in the heart of the Old Dominion. In the center of Capitas there is a gigantic pit from which blazes a miles-high beacon of unlight: a powerful beam of dark fire that casts as much shadow as it does light, shrouding the entire city in a hellish glow of dancing shadows. This is the unfettered and unbound essence of Hazlia, fallen god of mankind; it is a corruption unlike anything that ever came before it and it has sung its siren song for centuries, drawing the mad, the broken, the despairing and the power hungry to it like moths to a flame.

Over the centuries, hundreds, if not thousands, of mortals have answered the call. Of these only a mere handful have survived, and they are the Anointed: the Prophet, the Warlord, the Speaker, the Seer, the Howler, the Keeper, the Branded, the Whisperer, and the Broken. The first whisper of their names is starting to be heard in the lands of man, a whisper that will soon burgeon to become a storm…

Sub-factions

The Final Creed: Even as Hazlia fell, some of his priests led prayers in his name while the panicked population of the city tried to escape. Even as the shockwave tore through Capitas and reduced the city to rubble, they chanted His praise while being torn to pieces by flying rubble and an enraged mob. Even as Hazlia's un-Birth blanketed the land in a peal of death and darkness, ripping the life from all but the hardiest, they called out his name with reckless abandon, and his Name might be the last thing to pass their lips. Even as Hazlia's dark will was made manifest and the dead walked once more to slay the living, they cried out his name in joyous communion and somehow managed to survive. They are the Apostles of the Final Creed, the last and most fervent worshipers of Hazlia that ever walked the earth, and their task is not complete.

Shielded from Hazlia's baleful power by countless meters of rock, a maze of storerooms and dusty workshops lie next to forgotten sepulchers, abandoned mausoleums and long neglected naves carved into living rock. This is where the priesthood of the Final Creed carries on its work of bringing Hazlia's vision to the world. Once that meant marching with Hazlia's untold legions and bringing death to any mortal creature that stood in their way, utilizing their divine and sorcerous gifts to complement the unthinking savagery and endless numbers of Hazlia's unliving tide. With Hazlia's defeat and partial imprisonment, the Creed retreated to Capitas humbled and broken, settling next to the Pyre, that unceasing torrent of corrupted Primordial power that

fountains from the epicenter of the Fall in the center of the dead city. Their leader, his original name lost to time and madness, committed ritual suicide by walking into the Pyre.

Even as their reduced number contemplated oblivion for only a handful had survived to this point, the first of the Pilgrims began to arrive. Driven by need or pulled by madness or faith, a few crazed survivors started trickling into Capitas. Their sanity blasted by the sights they had seen, or perhaps lost well before by the heinous acts they had committed, the Pyre called them from across Eä and they proved a fertile seeding ground for the apocalyptic faith of the Final Creed.

Even so, with the vast majority of the unliving tide defeated and their reduced numbers, the cult was in a trajectory to become a little more than a ghastly footnote in the history of man. All of that changed with the arrival of the Prophet, the first of the Anointed. Stepping forth from the twisted primordial flames of the Pyre, the Prophet rejoined his brethren, forged anew in the unholy furnace of his gods' impotent rage. Their former leader had cast away all his mortal weakness and become a living vessel of his gods' power and purpose. For while Hazlia's will had been bound, his power remained available for those desperate, crazy or faithful enough to claim it.

Gifted with a fraction of Hazlia's corrupt essence, the Prophet rekindled the dying embers of the Final Creed's faith. Channeling his newfound powers, the Prophet sought to recreate Hazlia's undead tide and scour the world clean of sentient life only to find that his powers were no match to those of Hazlia: he could not reanimate more than a scant few thousand corpses.

Years and decades of studies and horrible experimentation followed as the Final Creed sought to appease their dark master's reincarnation, but progress was slow. Hundreds were sacrificed on the altars to fuel his mad quest for power and their bodies reanimated in a vain attempt to recreate the legions Hazlia once commanded. Having cast off his mortal frailties, the Prophet cared not for how far he pushed his servants, driving the cult to the edge of extinction time and time again. Disgusted by the frail efforts of his mortal followers, the Prophet turned further and further away from them, dedicating himself to his own vile studies and experiments. Despite his best efforts the Prophet was forced to concede while his attunement to his god could grow with time and sacrifice – only those who were sworn to Hazlia in life could be reanimated in death. The Prophet was undeterred, however. He might not be able to follow in his master's footsteps, but he could certainly complete his great undertaking. It would simply take time… time he now had.

Returning to his followers, the Prophet was shocked to discover that he was no longer the only power in Capitas. Others had taken advantage of his long sojourn into the dark secrets of mortality and divinity and usurped a portion of his god's power, twisting it to their end. Where once he alone commanded the baleful power of Hazlia, others now dared to tread.

Adding insult to injury, his harsh treatment of the Final Creed and subsequent abandonment had left the cult ripe for treason and sedition. Many of his favored followers had cast their lot

with these usurpers. While he alone remained the true master of these dark arts, his enemies now benefited from years of careful research and dark secrets he alone had been privy to. Enraged beyond reason, the Prophet marshaled his forces to take down these usurpers, these Anointed, and reclaim his primacy as Hazlia's Chosen.

The war that raged in Capitas and the dark deserts beyond was the stuff of nightmares that thankfully no sane mortal was forced to witness. Undead legions marched upon each other and clashed for days on end, their bodies as tireless as their masters' spite. At first the Prophet was successful and managed to bring down a few of the Anointed, fueling his power with their own.

But his resources had been stretched thin. Maintaining his control over Capitas and his own trove of suitable cadavers and bodies was no match for the reanimated Legions his opponents could marshal from the burial grounds scattered across the empire. Worse still, the longer the war raged, the more irreplaceable bodies were being lost, and with them the hopes of conquering the mortal realms.

Faced with these dire facts and the united opposition of the remaining Anointed, the Prophet was forced to concede defeat. To preserve his master's dark legacy the Prophet agreed in desperation to share Capitas and reform the Final Creed. It would now serve all the Anointed equally and share what knowledge and influence it had amassed with all Anointed.

That is how the Final Creed came to take its current form. Today countless servitors labor daily beneath the oppressive oversight of their unliving masters, to uncover more suitable bodies in the forgotten tombs and catacombs of the Old Dominion, to fuel their dark designs. Morticians and sculptors labor together to repair those bodies that were ravaged by time or battle, seeking to restore their function by replacing their lost parts with replacements carefully carved from the very stones of Capitas – stones that have witnessed Hazlia's darkest slaughter and bathed in his baleful power for centuries. Some go even further, seeking to combine these unholy remnants with the will of his most loyal lost followers to create unstoppable engines of destruction, all to bring their dead god's will upon the mortal world.

The Fallen Pantheon: The Pantheon of the Old Dominion were once mankind's greatest allies, a gathering of puissant primordial powers dedicated to fostering a nascent mankind beset by countless perils. While Hazlia led it, he was not always the most powerful entity within it: Kleon, the Lord of Valor, and Ninuah, the Merciful Mother, were entities even older than himself who had, for their own reasons, been benevolent to the stripling race of Man. Intrinsically tied to their aspects, these divinities could not rise as fast or as far as Hazlia who would eventually come to eclipse them.

In time Hazlia became aware that the Trinity was simply not enough to satisfy the ever-growing needs and demands of mankind and so struck a plan to *create* divinities from the smallest and faintest of the motes' Creation. Much like himself before Man's worship, these motes lacked any sentience or direction and merely drifted through the ether. With an intrinsic understanding of divinity and the power of belief, Hazlia quickly set to creating loyal servants and heralds to

satisfy the growing demands of his followers. The process, in essence, was simple: all Hazlia had to do was name and define these Celestials and channel a portion of his own power into them. Thus quickened, channeled human faith would rush to them, empowering them and shaping them at the same time, creating the gods that man himself had envisioned under Hazlia's guiding eye.

Over the course of centuries, the Pantheon became populated with a plethora of angels, saints, and heralds. An entirely new field of theology had to be created merely to attempt to catalogue and name the countless divine servants that crowded the heavens of the Old Dominion: seraphim, cherubim, powers, and saints all toiled together to enact the will of Hazlia upon the world. Depending on their role and importance, these beings could continue growing in power and awareness, becoming minor divinities in their own right, such as Himeros the God of Winter, or Selene the Lady of Secrets and the Moon, but always subservient to the will of the Pantokrator, Hazlia.

While few are aware of it today, the horrific events of the Fall had a cataclysmic effect on the Pantheon. As the ritual of the Sorcerers reached its zenith, Hazlia became aware of their efforts and bent every effort and means he had to ensure their destruction. Almost the entire Pantheon was unleashed against these upstart humans who sought to attack their god, but to no avail: centuries of familiarity and worship had armed the sorcerers with all the information they needed to defeat their celestial foes. Countless died in the opening salvoes of the conflict and hundreds more died to no avail before the ritual was complete. Those few who survived, often the most powerful and aware, perished in the immediate aftermath of the casting as Hazlia called on their power in an attempt to resist the fate the human sorcerers had unleashed on him. Broken winged angels tumbled from the heavens even as sacred statues and shrines cracked and collapsed under the divine onslaught and their drained, inanimate husks rained down on Capitas for hours before Hazlia was overpowered and cast down from heaven.

For those few celestials who survived the Fall, an even darker fate was reserved: the Un-Birth. As Hazlia consumed and was consumed by Death, the abhorrent primordial energy of that unholy coupling flooded Capitas. Those few celestials who had survived were still linked to Hazlia and were utterly overwhelmed. As the Un-God's cry echoes across the heavens and the dead stirred to life, the hapless divinities were irredeemably corrupted by the energy that had consumed their God and rose once more as dark reflections of all they once stood for: Himeros the Hungering Dark and Selene Who Stalks the Night are just a few of the horrors birthed in that apocalypse. How many succumbed to this fate, few can say, for they thankfully remain bound to the Pyre and Hazlia's baleful energies, sparing the world of their horror.

But that innocence is about to be shattered.

As the Anointed prepare for war and the Final Creed stirs, the Fallen Pantheon has finally found the means to escape their captivity. For both these terrifying groups have discovered how to once more call forth the Pantheon to inflict Hazlia's vision upon the world. As embodiments of

Hazlia himself, the Anointed possess enough of Hazlia's power to sustain a portion of the Pantheon even away from the Pyre, while the Final Creed has discovered that the greatest reliquaries of the old faith and the desecrated bodies of these divinities can be infused to sustain the immortal soul of their occupants with sufficient sacrifice.

Far from mindless automata, the remnants of the Pantheon are possessed of a powerful will and even the Anointed must negotiate with them to secure their services. So the Legions of the Old Dominion march to battle once more, wreathed in the dark and glorious majesty of the members of the Fallen Pantheon. May the Gods have mercy upon us all. For They will not.

The Legions: In the moments that followed the final act of the Fall and the unholy amalgam that was spawned, the Un-God's maddened sentience reached out to all available vessels; and at the time, those vessels were plenty, for any still and soulless body would do. Countless dead, an empire of them in fact, would be filled with a mockery of life, a twisted vigor of Creation instilled with the emptiness of Death. These endless hosts were for the most part lacking purpose or guidance, the Will of the Un-God too spread and too scattered to offer either, and the life-ending power that existed in that moment of history was contained by its own numbers. But as decades and centuries passed, this explosion of un-life would settle. The new, unnatural primal force would meet its limitations and be reined in by them. The Un-God was shaped partly by faith, the same faith that had shaped Hazlia. Those sworn to him would forever remain vessels of his Will. And in the endless catacombs under Capitas, the Legions of the faithful were waiting with eternal patience.

It is believed that the adoption of the mummification practice began with Hazlia's semi-primitive clergy during the times of the First Tribe. Inspired by the sealed bodies of Dweghom found in the Hold where Hazlia was discovered, the priests of the fledgling god would research ways in which their bodies could be preserved so that they could serve their god in the afterlife. It is perhaps only natural that the practice would be transferred to all members of the Dominion's Legions. After all, the origin of the Legions was a group of warrior priests of the First Tribe, equipped by Hazlia's ingenuity and dedicated to the expansion of His worship. The practice was continued, not simply as a mandate of tradition, but as a core element of the worship of Hazlia.

Chapels dedicated to mummification were built throughout the lands of the Dominion to serve the needs of those officials and warriors stationed there. In Capitas, however, an entire district, the Postern, would be covered by the scent of embalming fluid mixed with the aroma of ceremonial censers. In its center stood the Hall of Orcos, where the Rhadamanthi, priests of the Seer, would perform their gruesome task on the bodies of Legionnaires and the clergy. In its vast rooms, rows upon rows of stone slabs would host countless bodies throughout the centuries of the Old Dominion, its warehouses filled with the extracted organs of the faithful… as well as spare extremities, for the bodies of warriors would often need restoration before preservation.

With the exception of privately built and owned mausoleums by the wealthiest families, all of Hazlia's faithful were transferred back to Capitas to be set to their final resting place: the Still Lake; a massive, natural complex of caves, filled with underground rivers and lakes, which would eventually become the single largest mausoleum in the history of mankind. Processions for the dead legionnaires, their bodies covered by a sheet and in full armor, would start from Hazlia's tomb in the center of the Capitas, to the entrance of the Hall of Orcos, placed on a ceremonial boat. From the bowels of the Hall where the Still Lake awaited, they would be taken to their final resting place, tombs specially prepared and enhanced to keep the humidity at bay. It would not be long before the natural caves would be replaced by rows upon rows of these ornate tombs, forever encased in darkness and the soft sounds of water dripping in the still waters.

"To debate His genius is to debate eternity." This dogmatic paradigm in the lips of Hazlia's clergy was in the end spat with anger by those fleeing from the destruction of the Fall. Yet, as centuries have passed since the praise of their God's forethought was filled with bitter irony, one cannot but wonder if this mortal sentiment was shortsighted and premature. Could the Legions awaiting in the Still Lake be part of Hazlia's plan or, at the very least, a glimpse of his divine foresight?

Many of the few that know such things debate this. Some, respectful of the subtle influence of the Death part in the Un-God, remember their Ovidus: "*They will bring you their lost, but know not why."* Even Hazlia could not escape the pull of a true Primordial, they claim. Others saw a simpler perhaps explanation: His Fall, they say, proves that Hazlia was neither all-powerful nor all-seeing and Chance, for better or worse, is her own Mistress. From the very beginning of his Dominion to his own maddened end, Hazlia had made plans within plans, weaved contingencies upon contingencies. What the original plan behind his schemes was, probably no mortal can truly grasp but it simply happened to serve him in his Un-life.

Spotlight Articles

The Kürschbourgh Expedition: Even if a secret kept from the general population, the existence of the undead remnants of the Old Dominion has been known to humankind for centuries. This knowledge has primarily been preserved and safeguarded by the Orders and the higher echelons of power in the City State of Acheron, who have historically monitored and guarded the passages to the East, while most of the times the W'adrhŭn would dissuade, or eliminate, most stranglers that managed to pass through those two human sentries. Despite their best efforts, however, curiosity, scholarly pursuits, misguided worship, and the promise of an entire civilization's worth of treasures – not to mention the foul call of the Pyre – have been singing their siren call, attracting people from all sorts of life to the broken remains of Capitas. The few that have fled with their lives after witnessing the current state of the Old Dominion have sparked misbelieved tales about the dead haunting the living; but that is about as far as the truth has been preserved among the general population.

Shielded from such truths were even the last few Emperors. In 501 P.R., Emperor Otto III the Accursed saw his reputation and influence dwindle after his marriage to Myran of Leon, a pronounced Deist, and the Church turned almost openly against him, refusing to donate the Palatinate to the Empress and founding the Paeneticum in its stead. Despite his own indifference, a childhood friend and Theist sympathizer, Duke Gabriel von Kürschbourgh, urged him to keep some kind of good will between him and the Holy Father and the two men eventually agreed that recovery of a Champion's Artifact from the Old Dominion would serve the Emperor's purpose. An expedition led by the Duke and funded personally by the Emperor, would embark in secret to recover such an artifact. Of the total of forty men, only five returned alive and the expedition's purpose and findings were never revealed save to a handful of individuals.

Herein follows the surviving account of Squire Jeorg of Riim, as found in the Classified Section of the Paeneticum's Library:

The abomination with its bannerman stood within range of our archers. We rode out, my Lord Gabriel, Father Mattias of Heigue, Bannerman First Class Peter Shultz, and myself, as Squire to his Excellency, to meet it.

The differences to the other creatures, based on the scout's report and our own observations, were apparent. Unlike the bannerman next to it and the dozens of other creatures behind it, it looked as if its armor protected something more than just bones. Stripes of cloth escaped the plating and ceremonial attire, possibly strapping dead, rotten flesh to the bone. A deathmask, adorned with a crown of sunrays, covered its face. Its bannerman held a golden Solifer, like those of the Old Empire, albeit torn and tattered. Much like the deathmask of the creature, my Lord Gabriel was expressionless but for those who knew him best, for I could see the anger that danced silently in his eyes when they fell on the banner.

"Who are you?" he asked the masked one, as if talking to a man. To my surprise, the thing replied. Its torso did not move as it spoke, nor did the neck flex. There was no breath behind the words, only the mask stirring slightly as the mouth moved behind it. The voice was low, a muffled whisper, barely strong enough to reach our ears. Father Mattias circled his heart. Bannerman Shultz tried to calm his mare, which stomped the ground nervously.

"We are one," it said. "We are the name you do not speak. We are the Light at the End of thy prayers."

"Where do you come from?"

"We always were."

My Lord Gabriel paused, troubled.

"Who are you?" he asked again.

"We are…"

“No,” my Lord interrupted. “You. Who are **you***?” The creature simply starred at him for some moments.*

“…I…” it struggled to pronounce, almost coughing, as if the word was foreign. “…am Keeper.”

“That is no name.”

“No.”

“Is that a nickname then? A role?”

“No.”

“Then answer who…”

“It is…I.”

“Are you, Keeper, the commander of this army?”

“No.”

“Is there a commander, a king, an emperor, a general among you?”

“No.”

“Then are you the only authorit…?”

*“**Yeeees…**” sighed dozens pairs of dead lips, as if with pleasure for finally admitting this; the wind carried the word and made it bounce against the sides of the rocky path, making our torches dance nervously and bringing it to our ears again and again and again. As if by reflex, their whole army had answered and, I cannot deny, it sent our hearts to race, our horses to falter, our guts grow numb and cold. All the dead had spoken. All but the Keeper.*

“…I…” it whispered, struggling again once the echoes died out. “…am not. We are One. You do not see, Gabriel, yet We are as clear as day,” it went on, tilting its head. It was hard to discern its tone, but I sensed uncertainty dressing its voice. I am under the impression that as time passed, it seemed to be able to communicate better and that uncertainty fading.

“How do you know my name? Speak, fiend, before…!” demanded my Lord but his words were cut. Again as one, the dead raised their shields and the bowmen reached for their arrows, angry sighs and muted growls reaching our ears. We reached for our swords, but they stopped as suddenly as they had started.

“You. Will not. Speak thus. To Us,” the Keeper said slowly, its head lowered. Then it went on, raising its head to look at my Lord, the army behind it falling at ease once more. “We know your name, yes,” it said after a while. “It echoes in Our… My mind. Words at dawn, murmurs in my head. Do you see?” The question, I felt, held significance, as if the creature itself was uncertain of the answer.

“No, creature, I do not, but I swear to…”

*“**Swear to Us.**” Again, a reflex, a sigh more than a reply, and again the twofold feeling. It felt like a command but also a plea.*

“You unholy…”

“My Lord…!” said I, hurriedly, trying to appease to him and I remember my throat was dry. I do not hide that I feared the creatures, just as I feared my Lord’s reaction.

“So be it,” he muttered, controlling himself before talking to the Keeper, his words more like a growl than a greeting . “I am Duke Gabriel von Kürschbourgh. In the name of His Imperial Majesty, Otto the Third, Emperor Divine of Mank…”

They all reacted as one, once more. They made a sound, like drawing a single, endless, choking breath, like wind trapped in a narrow tunnel, gaining speed and might and volume with every moment. I felt the back of my hair rise and the bitter taste of terror filled my mouth, as our men exclaimed in fear and reached for their weapons, before our Lord raised his hand. I think, now, that the dead were laughing.

“Stand aside, creature!” my Lord growled over their sound. “In the name of the Emperor, I demand..!”

All of a sudden their… laugh ceased and deathly silence fell among their troops, even as the Keeper spoke.

“You do not..!” it almost crowed in anger but it stopped. When it went on, it was the same, low tone. “…demand. And We shall not command. We shall offer. Once.”

I believe it was the creature’s intention to try and sound pleasant when it spoke again.

“We bring only peace. Love Us. We do. Return to Us. We did to you. Accept Our offer.”

My Lord Gabriel did not answer. He looked at the armor of the Old Empire, the ceremonial deathmask of the Keeper and finally the Solifer, the dawning sun, a sun similar to the one his Lordship’s banner bore. I do not know what he thought, and he never shared, then or later.

“What is your offer?” he asked at last.

Once again, the answer came from all, only this time it was no whisper, it was no sigh. It was a statement, a promise, certain and inescapable, echoing like distant thunder slowly reaching us in the confines of the pass.

*“***Death.***”*

Behind the golden mask, I felt the smile of the Keeper.

“We bring only peace,” it repeated.

The Apostate Caelesor: A common misconception about the Old Dominion is the impression of a single civilization, an empire that was built slowly but with an almost streamlined course through history. This view is not without flaw. As Hazlia changed and his understanding of both himself and the world was being altered, the dogma of the theocracy shifted with him, as did the face of his empire. Much like any other long-lasting state, the Old Dominion passed through different stages and had had to endure different challenges, from both within and without, and withstand the tests of time. In fact, the term *Domini Dominium*, or the Lord's Dominion, which would come to overshadow the empire's multifaceted history, was coined much later, when the Dominion had almost carved its final borders on the continent's map, a mere few hundred years before its decline and Fall. And one man above all else was responsible for this final and catalytic change: the Apostate Caelesor.

Clavthios Primus Julianus was a member of the Primari tribe, who claimed to be descendants of the First Tribe, and nephew of Constantius Primus, one of the most celebrated Caelesors of that period. His entire life he was being groomed to ascend unto the office of Caelesor and to lead Hazlia's unified people. This grooming was, of course, tailored to the needs of a theocracy: administrative training walked hand in hand with rhetoric and political studies, in addition, of course, to theology, divine philosophy and even the ascetic life of a clergyman. Tutored by the best in their respective fields, Clavthios' mentors and spiritual fathers were numerous and widely recognized from his parents' time, paving the way for his inevitable ascension.

Clavthios proved a quick study, his memorizing skills and unparallel education, however, was not always matched by his natural talent or instincts. Entrusted by his uncle with drowning the Second Rebellion of the Seuvic and Russ tribes of the North, his initial success eventually turned into a partial disaster, as his textbook strategies were quickly recognized and countered by the rebels. His successor, Issus Pektussimus, met with his own failures and those proved to be his only redeeming factor, as the general opinion attributed the losses to the ferocity of the rebels, rather than the failures of their own generals. Still, according to most historic accounts, the campaign was a typical representation of Clavthios' faults, namely a rather dogmatic and traditionalistic mind, that often failed to recognize the need for adaptations and adopt those as necessary. Despite that, however, Clavthios education prominently ticked all the boxes and his theological papers reflected his deep knowledge and understanding of Hazlia's dogma. His career in the clergy (and therefore his political career) proved to be a straight line to the higher echelons of power. There, however, his streamlined career came to an end; for with the death of Constantius, at the heart of Hazlia's dominion, a schism was being carved between the people and the newly elect Caelesor Julianus.

As with any period of political unrest in the Old Dominion, the true cause behind the schism was a debate concerning dogma, which always reflected a shift in Hazlia's own views and goals. Constantius had ruled most of his life according to the paradigms of old, assuming a series of honorifics that reflected the Pantheon's Triumvirate as rulers of Divinity and Humankind alike. But after the failures of both his nephew and his successor in the campaign against the rebel

tribes, Constantius led the last expedition himself, bringing the province back into the fold with ruthless efficiency, while recovering numerous artifacts of the First Tribe from the rebels. Based on these newfound relics, as well as his popularity, upon his return he was hailed as the Will of the Pantokrator – a term much used by the common folk about Hazlia but never canonized in the hymns of the church until then and which means "Almighty, All-Holding or All-Dominant." Before his death, the whole series of honorifics the Caelesor bore would shift, reshaped to reflect the new dogma, with Hazlia as the Pantokrator. These titles would come to enhance the power of the Caelesor's seat, drifting away from the paradigm of a "leader among equals" and reflecting the power shifts of the Heavens, where Hazlia was ready to claim his position as sole and undisputed leader of the Pantheon.

The gap left by Constantius' death would prove hard to fill. The late Caelesor was much beloved by the people of Capitas, who had readily adopted his preaching and the shifts in dogma he had proposed through both action and words. The rest of the Theocracy, however, was not as eager to adopt such changes, seeing the influence of their own gods shrink before the new paradigm and their own power and influence slip away. The compromise was Julianus, whose familial ties with Constantius would appease the population and the former Caelesor's supporters, while his textbook approach to administration would ensure that the status quo in the Theocracy would not be disturbed. Julianus, however, had different plans.

While he dismissed the title of "Will of the Pantokrator," Julianus readily adopted and enhanced upon the reinforced powers that Constantius had brought to the Caelesor's office, only to use them in order to achieve a return to the "traditional values" of the Theocracy. He enhanced the roles of the Legions in every day matters beyond wars. He unearthed practices and preaches from the early days of Hazlia's worship, some of them dating as far back as the times of the First Tribe, leading modernized and more effective mummification practices to be forbidden in favor of older, traditional practices, which were held in greater ceremony but were much less effective in their preservation. In themselves, these moves meant little practically; or so did Julianus think. In essence, however, Julianus was reawakening an old division of the Theocracy: "pure" citizens, descendants of the First Tribe, and conquered nations were being divided.

Politically, he believed that this way he would offer both sides what they truly desired; an increased influence of the Caelesor's office and the Assembly but a dogmatic enhancement of the role of the Pantheon. On a personal level, however, Julianus was driven more by his theosophical views rather than his political sense. His analysis of dogma was specific and based on centuries of practices and, in his mind, this was adamant and eternal. At the same time, he feared that the absolute unification of everything in the Theocracy would lead to its collapse and dissolution for it did not reflect the founding principles of the Theocracy. His own experience in the northern rebellion had taught him that the strength of the Theocracy lied in its diversity and this, he believed, was best reflected in the form of a ruling Pantheon; Hazlia was the first among equals. The blessing he had received during the ceremony of his ascension to the office of Caelesor proved that beyond any doubt, in his mind. His reformations, therefore,

would advocate a return to the past, where each tribe was distinct, each church of the Pantheon had its own practices and the Caelesor with his Assembly ensured the unity of the Theocracy as a whole, mainly through control of the Legions. The reaction was immediate from both sides of the schism and his support begun to dwindle faster than his reformations could be brought into effect. But the deposition of a Caelesor was a thing unheard of at the time. It took only five years for this to be rectified.

The truth is that at the time the very concept of tribes and different churches had much faded in the minds of the people and existed mostly in theory and politics. Centuries of living side by side, mixing and worshipping the same dogma, had forged a new identity in the minds of most of its inhabitants. This was Hazlia's success; and Julianus' failure to realize. The diversity he dreamed of still existed and the only thing his reforms achieved was to carve divisions. Overnight, families who had been native to Capitas for generations were treated and viewed by the Theocracy as children to be guided at best, conquered to be ruled at worst. Allowed to follow their own gods and sensing a weak Caelesor, supported by a weakened dogma, distant Legions were, perhaps unsurprisingly, the first to cause tension, rushing to the defense of their clergy or their province before they rushed to the support of the Caelesor. Pockets of insurgencies appeared throughout the land, as the once complicated but understood unity of the Theocracy was being redefined. Loathe to do so but forced by his political isolation, Julianus led the campaign against these insurrections himself, only to meet with another military failure. His own Legions' officers ignored him and he was abandoned on the field of battle, when none followed his charge. He was never seen again, neither alive nor dead. For the next two years, the assembly of the Caelesor would rule in his absence and its efforts concentrated on the establishment of a new dogma that would bring peace to the land. Eventually, he would come to be remembered as the Apostate Caelesor, his heretical views almost breaking the unity of Hazlia's empire. His fate remains unknown and, perhaps, unimportant. His role, some note, was over and his involuntarily mission was accomplished to perfection. In the end, Julianus was never officially deposed. A new Caelesor was needed under the new dogma and indeed Hazlia's blessing was offered as Caelesor Iovianus ascended to office. The nuances of the new dogma were as numerous as they were complicated. The end result, however, is known: the "*Domini Dominium*" was established, as all the people and all the churches were united under the banner of Hazlia Pantokrator. Hazlia was being forged into the undisputed ruler of the people and, more importantly, the Pantheon.

Conjuctions and Conjectures Vol 6:

Conjunctures and Conjectures

by Benjamin Tok

Volume 6 – Divine Influences on Social Evolution and Decay

[…]

We are fully aware that our research and theories will once more be scrutinized, then ridiculed, being attributed to a so-called mental condition and an apparent “brilliance in analyzing patterns that unfortunately often serves as fuel for a need to find patterns when none exist.” It has also been suggested that this researcher’s studies in three different Chapters as well as this researcher’s field of expertise in “Influences of Primordial Motes on Time and Space” cloud rationality and allow for external influences to constantly overshadow the power and influence of pure human nature in historical events. Our reply to such criticisms is simple: Five volumes in this popular and financially profitable series of “Conjunctures and Conjectures,” I am caoutchouc, you are resin. Rather than provide answers with a mantle of self-appointed authority, our works are meant to inspire questions and challenge dogma, based on rational patterns; an attitude that could have, perhaps, averted disaster once.

The dates proposed in this timeline are – with the exception of course of certain, well-documented events – not accurate in the most traditional sense and are, in fact, mostly speculations. Speculations, however, that are based on the application of specific patterns and rules of time and social evolution – such as Fatima’s Regulations, Endestus’ Law of Momentary Threes, Solon’s Rule of Social Pattern Repetition and our own Tok’s Paradigm of Entwined Chronomarks. As the influence of divine intervention in the advancement of a society is hard to record or account for, we will admit that the applications of these patterns and laws were done by approximation. Later in this introduction, we will present exactly which patterns were applied, why those were chosen, examples of other applications of said patterns and the projected influence of the divine on them. Before we dive into that analysis however, it is imperative that we attempt a glimpse of the grand picture. Time is the Great Dance of the Cosmos and before we explore its pattern step by step, it is to the benefit of learning that we first observe the entire routine:

Circa 1900 A.R. – The Discovery of Hazlia.

This we believe to be a misrepresentation of the truth and a convenient simplification of facts. Pre-humans had existed for millennia before this, as made evident by the proto-myths concerning the Breaking and the First War. We propose that a more accurate representation would be “The First Tribe Discovers a Primordial Mote and Begins a Systematic Worship That Will Eventually Forge Hazlia,” which is admittedly less catchy and a bit of a mouthful. In this tome we will explore the possibility of more than one tribe having discovered the primordial mote before the First Tribe, as well as their gruesome fate at the hands of the things that dwell in the Deeps below abandoned and unguarded Holds.

1900 -1700 A.R. – The Firestone.

At this time, the Mote-That-Would-Be-Hazlia is slowly shaped as a life-giving god of fire and stone by the primitive minds of the First Tribe. Its people begin to wield fire but are slow to master its use. Modern linguists propose that, because of this, the name “Hazlia” means “Burning Stone,” “Firestone” or “Inner Sun.” Others underline the lack of evidence to this and

propose that it is connected to the Sorcerer word for “Origin.” Others still suggest that it is a case of onomatopoeia, attributing to the sound a fire would make when trying to speak. In this chapter we will explore the possibility that Hazlia is indeed a name, one, however, discovered, not forged, by the First Tribe. One that was always meant to describe just one thing: that small aspect of Creation, that specific primordial mote.

1700-1600 A.R. – The Bronze Covenant.

The evolution of the First Tribe’s society accelerates, as Hazlia’s own consciousness resembles that of a newborn. The creation of tools fitting for human needs allows for agriculture to evolve. It is generally believed that at this time a large portion of the First Tribe migrated outside the Hold and put their new tools to use. In this chapter we will explore the inconsistencies of these paradigms. We will suggest that, while possibly still largely instinctual, the foundations of Hazlia’s individuality had already been largely formed and that the exodus from the Hold was part of a covenant between a god and his faithful: his proto-clergy would force the main Tribe outside – paving the way for Hazlia’s own escape – in exchange for knowledge privy only to them.

1600-1400 A.R. – The Iron Covenant.

Having been propelled through a bronze age within decades, the cult of the old god immerges clad in iron, the progenitors of his Legions. While bronze tools and weaponry had ensured the safety of the First Tribe from the predations of other tribes, iron will ensure dominance and expansion. Here we will reinforce our suspicions from the previous chapter, that the symbiosis of Hazlia with the First Tribe and especially his clergy was deliberate, and a new covenant had been forged. In exchange for dominance over the fields of battle, and therefore expansion of their rule, Hazlia would gain more followers and, thus, more worship.

1400-1300 A.R. – The Sun’s Son.

The academic society generally accepts that at this time Hazlia’s longing for the times of Creation are interpreted by his clergy as him once being a part of the Sun, come to the world to teach and guide them. Thus, the paradigm of conquest will shift into one of assimilation where possible. It will be our suggestion that there is enough evidence to suggest that, by this time, Hazlia has already formed full consciousness and a solid understanding of human nature. Surprised by how fast the warring tribes had assimilated his teachings in terms of handling Bronze and Iron, Hazlia is plagued by two things: humanity’s balanced nature and its slow understanding of his new, more advanced teachings, as well as the memories of warring Dweghom and what war did to their society and unity. *He* therefore shifts the paradigm of conquest and introduces gold, the “sun’s metal,” allowing for trade to develop.

Circa 1300 A.R. – The Exodus

With gold and steel wielded in equal measure, Hazlia has now expanded his influence over a much larger pool of worshippers. This offers him the strength to finally break free from the

Dragon Forge and follow his worshippers to the surface. It is our suggestion that this was a necessity as much as it was a desire for freedom; spurred by the return of the dwellers Below, Hazlia leaves the Hold for fear of confronting the motes of Destruction and their hosts that plague the depths of his Hold.

1300-1100 A.R. – The Careful Approach and the birth of Adversaries

The aforementioned encounters will in the end serve him. In the surface, he will perceive more motes and primordial shards attached to other tribes and human groups. These he will approach with care, assimilating some or cooperating with others. While it is largely believed that with those of Destruction, his people go to war to eliminate their pools of worship, we will explore evidence to the contrary. At this time, an elaborate group of adversaries will be brought into the dogma and familiar names such as Belzul, Baalbus, Jrukul etc. will first appear in religious preaching. While the details of that period's dogma elude us, we believe that their inclusion to the Faith allowed for their sustenance through controlled worship, while enhancing Hazlia's image as a savior. These adversaries come to resemble demonic beings of fire and magma coming from below – where else would a mote of Creation place the origin of its Enemies? This, we will suggest, also explains why such an important landmark, such as the First Tribe's Hold, has been forgotten. Shedding the primal, barbaric worship of the past that possibly included anything from human sacrifices to Aspects know what else, while dispelling the anathema of his imprisonment, Hazlia turns his old dwelling place into a promise of hell.

1100-800 A.R. – The Years of Expansion

In a scant three hundred years, Hazlia will come to forge the single largest empire the continent has ever known. It is generally believed that the aftermath of the First War, as well as the isolationism of the Elder Races, largely allowed for this to happen unopposed. This we will question through a series of events that can be highlighted in this period. Circa 1000 A.R., Hazlia will fight a coalition of neighboring tribes of Galtonni that worshipped another shard of Creation, Cleon. Even though his Legions lost a significant battle, peace will be brokered, mainly due to trade's influence and an understanding reached between Cleon and Hazlia. A few decades later, circa 950 A.R. the Berawe, worshippers of Nen – or Ninuah – will also join Hazlia's empire. By 800 A.R. the Triumvirate reigns over the Pantheon of Twelve, while an entire legion of lesser deities complete Hazlia's fledgling celestial host. On a divine level, therefore, a semblance of peace has been established. And yet, the Keltonni, who follow Ninuah, will not really join until 700 A.R. and the Seuvruss, who revered Sabauf – another name for Cleon – will continue to resist the Dominion's influences, even until the Fall. While many attribute these to Ninuah's and Cleon's mistrust towards Hazlia, we will propose, and support, that the influence of the Weavers and the Spires respectively would sway those two tribes to constantly challenge the Dominion – and Hazlia – from within, paving the way for its Fall.

800-313 A.R. – The Golden Age

The so-called Golden Age of the Dominion will see Capitas become the center of the civilized world, the flourish of magic and knowledge and the advancement of humanity to levels we have yet to rediscover. This, we propose, is but a façade and humanity's advancement should be attributed to the relative peace they were offered. The short-lived glory of the Triumvirate will fade as quickly as it rose and the complex realities of such vast an empire will lead to constant shifts in the dogmas of the theocracy, multiple name-changes in gods and unending adjustments to divine domains of certain deities. Already by 750 A.R. the Legions will be forbidden to worship any deity, as celestial power struggles turned from the fields of battle of the previous centuries to the political intricacies of a theocracy's bureaucracy, where Hazlia had the upper hand. By 600 A.R. the Domini Dominium will be established, suggesting that Hazlia's quest for power had become unending. All these, we propose, can serve as proof that the Fall of the Dominion was already a matter of time.

313 A.R. – The Last Crusade

Nothing summarizes Hazlia's decay and power lust more than the words that launched the Last Crusade: "Build ships. You have run out of men to conquer." To this popular understanding we will add the possibility that there was method in the madness. While we offer little insight to the events of the northern "Ragnarök," we will postulate that this rushed, almost suicidal crusade was neither the desperate act of a divine monarch challenged by a distant pantheon, nor the maddened whim of a deranged mind. Instead, we will propose that it is conceivable that such a surgical strike to the Dominion's infrastructure through a failure of such proportions could, conceivably, have been deliberate, heralding what was to follow.

301 A.R. – Falling

The next, last, centuries of the Dominion are largely attributed to Hazlia's absence, rather than his design. While we are inclined to accept this, we will challenge this theory: if Hazlia was gone, why would none of the rest of the Pantheon – much more so the other two of the old Triumvirate – try and rein in the obvious destruction that was befalling the Dominion? Were they rendered useless by the machinations of Hazlia? Or did perhaps "humanity's last hopes" allow for the destruction to occur? We will explore this possibility with certain arguments and theories in the following subchapters.

280 A.R – The Keltonni Wave

If Hazlia had indeed gone without trace, it is easy to attribute the exodus of Ninuah's "favorite children" to her foresight. As we are disinclined to base historical certainties to divine mysteries, however, we will explore the possibility that Ninuah had more than foresight to count on for her decision. Similar principal questions can be asked about both the Galtonni Wave and the Remnant Wave.

151 A.R. – The Battle of the Waste

From Cleon's point of view, rather than try and stop the rapid decline of the Dominion, we see him actively and strongly support the exodus with his Last Legion, to the point of direct confrontation with the Caelesor. Could this battle mirror the confrontations of the heavens? If so, why did Cleon's chosen stand alone?

98 A.R. – The Exile Campaign

Even as the Elder Races ravage the Dominion's people and lands, Cleon, Ninuah and the old pantheon do little to protect their worshippers. Were they engaged in their own skirmishes and power struggles, stopped, perhaps, by one or more of their own? Or was it a deliberate decision to allow for the destruction to come and, more importantly, for Hazlia to be destroyed?

0 – The Fall.

In this, our epilogue, we will examine how inevitable the Fall was. Reviewing all the previous suggested evidence and theories, we will present a pattern in its totality that will attempt not to answer questions but raise them. Was the Fall as inevitable as it seems in retrospect? Did fault lie in the gods, humans or even the Elder Races for this destruction?

[…]

Songs of the Last Fire Child: Mannheim is home to many grim tales and horror stories although to the Nords, truth be told, they are simply known as "stories." If the darkness and cold does not fuel one, then the monsters that plague the land or the violence of its people do. One legend, however, holds a special place in the cautionary tales grandmothers spin for their grandchildren: the Last Fire-Child.

There are many variations to the tale but some of its elements always remain unchanged: the Fire-Child is an immortal survivor of the army of Surtr, who – plagued by guilt over its crimes and blasphemy – now roams the land and burns those who offend the gods it once helped kill, while abducting others to exact its vengeance. Beyond that, however, the tale changes. In some cases, it is a Fire Jotun, who descends upon remote villages, burns them to the ground, leaving behind some impaled denizens around a grand pyre that is fed by the body of the rest, like scarecrows sending their shadows dancing around the cinders of their village. If those bodies are not found and properly burned in time, the legend says, then they will descend from their grisly resting place and join their maker. In others, the Fire-Child resembles a Braeon fae creature of dark fire, stealing younglings from their parents. This is a manling with dark, red hair who stalks the shadowed corners of a house. The way to spot it is to look for two red, blazing spots for eyes, appearing in the darkness; often in the gloom of a moonless night's forest or under one's bed, in the darkest corner of the room or among the shadows of coats in one's closet. A last variation speaks of an immortal warrior of Surtr, whose dead body, clad in its ancient crusader armor, seems fueled by fire, as soft sunlight seeps through its dead, cracked skin. He is most known for challenging young travelers on their way to the Kapp-a-Görask. Some

it lives dead and scorched for the carrions to feed on. Others, it takes with him. In all cases, it is said the crusader sings a taunting rhyme while he fights:

The soldier's just a bo-o-o-o-y,
The soldier's just a bo-o-o-o-y,
Take his mind and make it toy,
The soldier's just a bo-o-o-y.

The Last Fire-Child mythos is well established and widely spread in its different forms, throughout Mannheim. Eventually, the tale lost much of its former fearfulness, to the point that children often use a counting-out rhyme based on an old song. While children mostly use the last one or two verses in their games, for a "fairer" counting-out the full song is used, much to the disturbance of the few southerners that have witnessed it:

I like pain
My nightmares are my dreams
My soul is slain
My thoughts speak only in screams

Spread it! Spread it! Spread it! Spread it!

Today I heard His voice,
He told what to do,
He told me I must spread it,
That's my desire too.

Ones like me I'll gather, oh, happy band of fellows!
And all the world will tremble under our lifeless bellows!
We'll burn creation merrily, hidden from every glance,
Beyond its light we'll celebrate and with the shadows dance.

But if He thinks it's all for Him, then let Him guess again.
I said I'd serve him – and I did – until my dying breath.
A boy he made a soldier, a boy shall end him then,
I am the Last Fire Giant my flames will yet burn Death.

But first they will burn YOU!

Whatever the truth behind the legend, few things can be said are true: throughout modern Nord history, villages have been burned and raised overnight, with pyres of the dead made in their center and impaled bodies around it. Children have gone missing on occasion, from their midnight walks in the woods, as much as from the safety of their own beds. And many a lonely aspirant to join the raids by proving themselves have never made it to Kapp-a-Görask or back

home after doing so. These, of course, in the unforgiving land of Mannheim do not mean anything by themselves. But if there's anything Mannheim and the Nords teach us, is that their frightening tales often fail to capture the horror of the reality behind them.

The Hermits of Samash All-Seeing: Throughout the span of the Dominion in both time and geography, the worship of Hazlia was as multifaceted as it was complicated and adaptive. Whether by ambition, drive, memories of a bygone time, admiration or cunning – or even a combination of all of these – Hazlia reached for the mantle of the Sun early on in his career as God-Protector of the First Tribe. But the scores of tribes converted, assimilated, conquered or annexed by Hazlia's First Tribe demanded for Hazlia to assume different names, personas and aspects of portfolios, as the sun was revered by nigh all of them. This, of course, served the Pantokrator well; in his eventual quest for further elevation and, eventually, absolute dominion over gods and mortals alike, the complexity of his worship allowed for versatility and constant change, while the different approaches to the same theme by different tribes allowed Hazlia to dip into the portfolios of others among his Patheon, keeping the power of the greatest of them in check, while eventually subsuming lesser ones completely.

The end result, some believe, was madness and the Fall. Scattered and pulled in as many directions as there were personas and titles in his honorifics, Hazlia's very nature would be broken – or so they say. But there were lesser, more mundane consequences to this: by the third century P.R., the worship of Hazlia would sometimes vary outside of Capitas and the list of monastic orders, brotherhoods and lesser churches devoted to Hazlia were too numerous, too scattered and often too obscured to be remembered by most save perhaps the Relator Fidelium, the Chronicler of the Faithful.

Hazlia's Caelesors ensured that these monastic orders and churches, both large and small, were preserved and financially secured. Wishing for this diversity to keep him agile, Hazlia empowered them in different degrees, offering land, financing structures and even awarding tithing rights to the surrounding areas. Granting them allowances in their practices, these orders often escaped the jurisdiction of all but the Caelesor, including the Keeper of Prayers. Most importantly of all, however, they were not only allowed, but empowered in their worship. Recruiting and ensuring the continuation of these orders, brotherhoods and sisterhoods was not only encouraged, but actively supported. In the case of the Hermits of Hazlia-Samash the All-seeing, the practice was as obscure as it was extreme – and extremely effective.

The sun-god Samashut was originally worshipped by the Shakadhi, the one people that had rivaled the First Tribe in their ingenuity and advancement – some believe, due to the sponsorship of a member of the Directorate. So much so, in fact, that Hazlia's early legions never risked meeting them in battle. Instead, Hazlia appeared to them as Samashut personified and, while not all followed him readily, the rest, as they say, is history and the Shakadhi were soon brought under Hazlia's banner. Whether there had actually been a person or primordial shard behind Samashut originally or if his worship simply revered the concept of the sun, it has

been forgotten, but regardless, the identity of Samashut, gradually denigrating to Samash or Hazlia-Samash, was one of the first the Hazlia adopted beyond his own.

Before Hazlia assumed the persona, Samashut was an all-seeing god of the sun, judge of the living and dead in equal measure. While this role was usually reserved for the Seer of the Pantheon in his personas as Orcos Radamanthus, the Hermits of Samash All-seeing remained faithful to the traditional worship; and Hazlia, feering the Seer almost as much as his Triumvirate partners, made sure they kept doing so. Entrenched far up the slopes of the eastern Herm mountain range, the Temple of Eyes doubled down as a prison for the most ruthless and violent criminals, condemned to death. While there were locals who were ready to serve their local tithe-lords, the Hermits mostly depended on their guests for recruitment… Offering a chance to life through dedication to Hazlia-Samash and the hermetical order, those which Hazlia blessed at the end of their trial periods and moments before their execution, would owe their lives to him – literally– and their hermit brothers and sisters.

The centuries of decline before Hazlia's cataclysmic Fall did not leave the Hermits, or any of the other monastic orders, unaffected. The greatest among them had become paramount cogs in the complex machinery of the Theocracy of the Dominion, acting as local authorities side-by-side with local preators and proconsuls – and thus a danger to the authority of the Caelesors who, in Hazlia's absence, held their offices through uncertainty and constant challenges. Their authority over locally assigned legions was paramount in the decision to disband them – and the turmoil this led to. By the time of Hazlia's Fall, many of them had been crippled or eradicated completely, but not all.

The lesser ones, such as the Hermits of the Samash All-seeing, scattered throughout the Dominion's lands – and even beyond – and isolated in their monasteries and temples, would be forced to bar their gates and keep a low profile. Without Hazlia's protection, they rightfully feared, their privileges could draw envious eyes. In the centuries that followed, most of them would be completely forgotten and ignored, their devoted faithful, almost completely isolated save for new recruits and accolades, would become an echo chamber of worship and zealotry. For some of them, perhaps too many by any logical account, this proved their salvation; entrenched in their monasteries and temples, far from the centers of civilization and destruction, they would survive the Fall.

This was the case of the Hermits of Samash All-seeing. Composed almost exclusively by fanatical criminals who – as they saw it – owed their lives to Hazlia personally, the Hermits would survive the first years after the Fall by what little life their modest monastery garden and farm animals could offer for as long as those endured. Eventually, when that proved too little and the animals perished from starvation and dehydration, they turned to their carcasses, then the bodies of their own dead compatriots around the temple; until, ultimately, they turned to the bodies of their own prisoners and what few deranged survivors they could hunt. Despairing in their zealotry for being abandoned, an expedition was sent to Capitas, led by one Brother Hanibus and six others. Months passed, then a year, until the remaining Hermits turned for substance to

those among them who failed one of their many grueling tests of faith – and despite the monstrosities committed, the Hermits saw their situation as tests from their god; and they were rewarded.

On a grey eve like all the others before it, a pale light shone through the ashen mists outside the temple's gates. Then, the heavy door of the Temple opened, its creaking protests heralding the dawn of a new life; Brother Hanibus, carrying a torch with dark flame had walked in. He found the half-remains of most scattered around the temple's grounds. Others, he found in weak embraces, struggling to muster the strength for a taste of flesh or blood. Others still he found having locked themselves in the prison cells to stay out of reach from their brethren, their own bitemarks on their skins. The good Brother smiled.

"I see you are ready," he said as he lowered the torch on each of them, offering an eternity in the embrace of their god. Today, even the rest of the Kherres and the Moroi shy away from the blood-crimson cowls of the Hermits of Samash All-seeing.

The Whisperer:

The Whisperer

– Report #665||42||12 by Sister Quaestor Eva Crussandi, Ashen Dawn Archives

Object's name:
The Whisperer – ANOINTED.

Known aliases:
Veiled Lady, Whispering Bride, Hidden Madonna,
Lady of Whispers, The Champion's Bride, Eternal Maiden.

I am able to report that some theories and speculations concerning the Whisperer, mainly put forth by my predecessor, the late Brother Questor Mattias of Künsch, have been, if not confirmed, then heavily supported by new evidence. As was Brother Mattias' suspicion, it would appear that the Whisperer has been forging groups in the places where she has visited, from secret societies to heresies or cults for the deranged or desperate.

It should be noted that the presence and activities of such groups have been our main means of tracking her movements; thus, this conclusion could be based on our limited understanding and perception of her own activities, movements, and motives. An alternate interpretation for the appearance of these groups is that they are simply fueled by her mere presence, a byproduct of her appearances more than the results of her devises. While there are supporters of this theory among my team, I myself do not adopt this interpretation and I base this on several observations.

I must note that the Whisperer has portrayed little to no interest in the fate of her groups after their creation. She has neither reacted, opposed, or attempted to thwart the elimination of any of them, either by us, the churches or local authorities. Furthermore, these groups seem

isolated and operating separately, each with its own modus operandi and adopting different rituals and beliefs. To this day, and throughout the years of observations, the different groups have never contacted or cooperated with their counterparts. These points could support the theory of lack of intention behind their creation, however such differences could also be perceived as planned.

Despite their differences, it must be underlined that, to our knowledge, the different groups have never clashed with each other. Ritualistic fanaticism, which seems to be the most apparent common denominator among the different groups, rarely leaves room for competition or alternate dogmas and yet not once, not even when present in the same cities, have these different groups vied for power and influence among those predisposed to such extremes.

Intrigued by this observation, further investigations revealed that their differences are surface level only; while rituals and approaches differ, these groups share core beliefs and understandings. To our understanding, the Whisperer approaches entirely different groups of people, from the fanatically zealous or the bored privileged to the destitute, hurt, desperate and miserable, thus it seems natural to employ different means of approach that would resonate better with each targeted social group. Her cults often start as small heresies to the Theist Creed or new interpretations of existing Dei. When left unchecked, a few of these group evolved into death cults which engaged in violent conversions, abductions, ritualistic murders (whose rituals, however, may vary from extremely violent to “kind” poisoning), while a number of them have been led to mass suicides – especially among those groups that had avoided detection for years.

Such extremes, which have proved paramount to the investigation, must be perceived as rare. On at least two confirmed occasions, her teaching prevailed over a young gentleman’s club – namely the Pragian Society of Hunt and Literature – and a small brotherhood of knights – the Leracian Knights of the Little Lady – where the teachings of the Whisperer were embraced as philosophical ideas and interpretations of the oath of fealty respectively. The discovery of these groups was entirely accidental – which, alarmingly, could propose that more such cautious groups could exist. In fact, it could be speculated that the vast majority of the Whisperer’s groups remain introverted, preferring quiet conversion to aggressive methods that risk attracting attention. In the end, however, all types share one common goal: gain oaths of fealty from their followers (or victims). This is done in the name of the Champion Returned, the Savior Sun, the All-father (sometimes Undying All-father), and, even if rarely so, Hazlia by name.

This last observation is, perhaps, the greatest indication that the Whisperer is purposefully bringing such groups of people together, founding cults and heresies where the ground is fertile. If their presence was a simple by-product, logic would suggest that at least some of those groups would turn their devotion to the Whisperer herself. While the “Veiled Lady” is often the object of admiration and adoration, she has, without fail, never been the central figure of the belief system of these groups.

The presence of the Whisperer herself has been partially confirmed, to date, in thirteen different cities on the outskirts of the Heartlands. While it has been suggested that her presence in the Kingdoms may date to decades, if not centuries, there is little to no evidence to substantially support such an extreme scenario; even so, one should not dismiss it entirely. While we can be reasonably certain of her presence at specific places and even during specific dates, she remains elusive; no eyewitnesses can be presented and we have only been able to place her presence after she had departed or, at least, after her "public" appearances had ceased in a specific area. Despite the numerous reports and reasonably accurate tracking of her movements, no discernible pattern can be detected and therefore none of our predictions so far have been successful. It must be admitted that we are no closer now to apprehending or terminating her, than we were five years ago.

Conclusion: Based on the above observations, I propose that the purpose of this Anointed's existence is, for lack of a better term, recruitment. Despite past failures, suggested courses of action must remain infiltration of these groups, followed by extraction and/or termination of the Whisperer herself.

Is the Dheukorro a Dead End?: Elena,

I have long been vexed by the notion of what Ankalimus writes in his Descentia's prelude:

Down deep, we must go,
Down deep where the brother broke.
Down deep, we must go,
Down and down again, under the darkest cloak.

There they lie, infinite worlds untold,
Under the soil, under the earth, under a Dweghom Hold
There they lie, corridors without end
There mind, soul and matter, there they all bend.

Now, since I have no doubt that you have in fact come closer to putting your hands in open flames than you have to opening the Descentia, allow me to explain.

When not rhyming badly, Ankalimus was considered THE authority on all matters Dweghom. In fact, his Descentia is the holy book of all scholars who, for whatever reason, seem infatuated by those destructive short savages. Even today, our breath-afflicted descendants in the West would likely accept the Lord's embrace where I to offer them a mere peek of the cover of my surviving copy.

Following me so far? Good.

Now, this six hundred and forty-two-page treatise on the sons of War, as he calls them, is indeed filled to the brim with information about them. I say information, however I suspect a large amount is theories as, apart from his – admittedly remarkable – work on their language and

rune system, he admits he presents what he has extrapolated from scattered conversations with members of their species, which I suspect must have amounted to a grand total of a quarter-watch at best. Still, all things considered, Ankalimus has done a thorough job of gathering materials from other writers, from the amassed knowledge of the Collegia and, being a Magos himself, even from the Magi's apocrypha. His findings are indeed limited but insightful and they span anything from history and modern social structure, to philosophical debates, their incomprehensible social standing system, nutritious needs and habits etc. To the language he dedicates, without exaggeration, half his book. To the rest he dedicates 49.9%.

But then there's that 0.1.

Dedicating no more than a few paragraphs, Ankalimus speaks of a tradition one caste's members undertake ritualistically, although none is barred from performing it either. It is called the Dheukorro, which he translates to "Descent," and during it, the Dweghom simulate the path their ancestors took before the Breaking. "Surely," Ankalimus writes and I quote, "this is an appropriate and adorable little tradition that befits their mythology." He explains not what mythology he refers to, nor does he mention this tradition elsewhere in his book.

But then he names it Descentia. And, rather unfittingly, has a poem in his prelude urging that "down, down we must go." Prelude and title best reflect the subject of a few paragraphs in a six hundred and forty-two pages.

Why?

I can think of two possible reasons as to why. One has to do with the very tangible disdain our Lord holds for the Dweghom. While scientific analysis was ever encouraged in His Dominion, I think we can admit that there were some restrictions in the past. Second is that Ankalimus was a Magos. Seeking knowledge beyond our Lord's tolerance was what those blasphemous bastards lived for, wasn't it? That and flaunting knowledge they possessed but did not share – especially with their peers. What better way for Ankalimus to tell his entire blasphemous community that he knew something he both wasn't supposed to and which they didn't, than putting in in plain sight as well?

Much as I admire the man's playful nature in this matter, I, of course, condemn his practice and his hybris in seeking knowledge beyond what the Lord allowed at the time. Today, however, it is His Will that we know all, we reach all.

If there are corridors without end, I want to traverse them and, with the Lord's gift, I have an eternity to put their description to the test. More importantly however, if there are infinite worlds untold, I want to bring the Lord's Gift to them.

Now wouldn't that humble our "First among equals?"

What say you?

F.

The Living World of the Warlord: Haunted by the ghosts of his past life, the Warlord stood amidst the covered ruins of a city, somewhere in the Dominion's old province of Galtonnia. Unsure of purpose for himself and his army, his military mind focused on exploring the old province, both to get the lay of the land but also to search for abandoned mausoleums that could provide new troops.

As memories of his life before his Anointment kept besieging his mind, tasks and objectives that would otherwise be simple were constantly second guessed. Realizing that both himself and his army had no need for the considerations of the living – such as provisions, fresh water or even rest – the Warlord struggled to adopt a firm mindset about his methods. Ultimately, and ironically adopting advice given to him in his previous life, he decided a slow and steady approach was favorable, as he learned to capitalize on the advantages he and his army held over the living. His first order of business, he decided, would be to excavate the ruins of the city around him. He would then use the old city, Divina, as his own base of operations, not only to serve as headquarters for his Legions but also to establish a seat of power against the other Anointed.

Despite the obvious advantages against the living, however, the Warlord was soon confronted with the obstacles that the troops had to overcome, fueled not by true will but the will of their betters and their own instinctual urges, offered by memories from their old lives. To locate those among them with more presence of mind, he assigned other officers to oversee operations, while he in turn oversaw the performance and capacity of his officers. One stood out from among them, Xhiliarch Iulios, who portrayed near full character and free will. Craving intelligent conversation, he invited the officer to walk and oversee the works in person.

It was during that walk and sparked by his conversations with the Xhiliarch that the Warlord realized just how much hatred he nurtured for the petty, insignificant wants and needs of the man he once had been – and partly was still. With the troops around him mirroring the hatred he himself felt for his own individuality, the Warlord felt a surge of power from that hatred. Channeling that might to his troops, he allowed them to tap into their own memories, a skill that would come useful in large combat situations.

It was at that time that the barbarians of the Wastelands launched their attack.

The Battle of Divina Ruins proved to the Warlord just how inefficient his troops could be. His own presence on the field and their near instant response to the surprise attack of the W'adrhŭn assured a victory – the barbarians did not manage to disrupt his operations to any significant degree and his losses were minimal. However, they managed to escape, likely having observed his operations near the crypts his troops were trying to unearth – thus able to report back about his purpose and objectives in the area. The only appropriate response for the Warlord would be to mobilize more troops from Capitas – with eyes set on the barbarian wasteland and the lands of the living beyond them.

A Request for Arms:

A report from Head Mortician Xalourios – 42nd Auxiliary Crypts, Still Lake, Capitas – Part 1.

Your Eminence,

As Head Mortician of the 42nd auxiliary crypt, I must humbly request your immediate attention, for matters have taken a grave turn in the most unusual fashion. Those so far inanimate have begun to rise in alarming numbers. Forgive my brashness, your Eminence, but I was under the impression that the cadavers under my care were to remain exactly that – cadavers. While I do not mean to imply – even in the slightest – that I resent this glorious gift of His, I must note that me and my assistants do not possess the capacity to support the sheer volume of our risen brethren.

Your Eminence, allow me to refresh your memory – for I know it to be burdened by matters of elevated importance. The 42nd auxiliary crypts, like many other such related branches, were used to house the common folk. Such individuals – unlike the priests and legionaries that made up a good portion of our city's populace so far – could not afford the latest and greatest in the embalming and entombment arts. When not preserved in the most precise way possible, remains succumb to deficiencies after several hundred years of excessive moisture, carcass beetle breeding cycles, and creative segmentation due to space constraints.

Even as it would serve as an eternity of aggravation for their caretakers, all this would remain in the realm of ignorant inconvenience for the awakened themselves; after all, most of them are neither aware nor have any needs, demands or role to play and their existences plague none but your humble servants of the 42nd auxiliary crypt. However, under the direct order of Anointed Keeper, we are to help the Awakened to, and I quote, 'return to active duty, serving in any capacity they can.'

Please understand, Your Holiness, that this is not an aesthetic conundrum. While some of the newly risen have emerged mostly intact – a missing finger or two, nothing of concern – most found themselves missing entire limbs or sections of their bodies. Blacksmiths without their hammer-striking arms, tailors without opposable thumbs, farmers without legs, criers without jaws, and the list goes on. As you can understand, such occurrences are not optimal. To add to the complexity of this situation, these poor souls are not fully aware, either of their current states or their surroundings. Seeing an oarsman trying to maneuver a coffin, as if it were a sea-fairing vessel, not only does it become quite tedious after the eighth day in a row, it also rather spectacularly fails to fulfill the mandate of the aforementioned Anointed decree. I must confess that my colleagues and myself are at a loss about the practicalities of executing the order given by the Anointed Keeper.

Rest assured, me and my assistants are hard at work to find a solution to this conundrum – as I certainly do not wish to burden you with the tedium that is practical problem-solving – and will inform you of our progress in a subsequent report. However, in the meantime, I must humbly request that your Eminence intervenes and explains to the Anointed Keeper of the

impracticalities of his decree and that assistance and guidance be provided to His humble servants, as to the means, methods and materials to be employed for its execution.

Your humble and grateful servant,

Xalourios, Head Mortician

A report from Head Mortician Xalourios – 42nd Auxiliary Crypts, Still Lake, Capitas – Part 2.

Exalted Archimandrite,

While I did not receive any response from Your Eminence during my first correspondence – I am undoubtedly sure that Your Eminence is pre-occupied with matters of higher standing and will respond when the time is proper – I must sadly inform you that the situation has taken a dive into greater depths of desperation and impracticality. I must also regrettably inform you that, while thy humble servant continues to serve in accordance with the tenants of his profession and the Lord's maxims, others seem to have abandoned both reason and decency. Allow me to explain.

To contain the situation presented in my previous report, I've resorted to using discarded limbs from the crypt occupants that have – for the time being at least – decided to remain truly inanimate. This allowed for some repairs to be made, thus enabling crafters and other common people to at least present the capability to serve their purpose, despite their limited mental capacities. This is far from a perfect solution; suitable limbs are in short supply indeed. Other replacements have also been tested but any non-organic solution is futile to consider. Thus, I've come up with the following ingenious resolution. During my time studying in the Postern district, massive charnel houses were used to dispose of any material that was deemed unsuitable for proper burial; such remains, though haphazardly stacked, were still treated with copious amounts of preservative chemicals and other such compounds, guaranteeing a relative level of enduring pristineness. Exhilarated at this prospect, I ordered said charnel houses to be excavated and their repositories unsealed. To my dismay, I found that they had partially been looted. To my horror, that very same afternoon, a newly appointed Anointed officer (serving Anointed Seer), sporting a suspiciously mismatching arm beneath their robes, presented themselves to me, demanding I deliver one blacksmith, two scribes and three tailors, in the best possible condition but not demanding them to be fully functional.

Your Eminence, I must implore you to take action. There is an entire – for lack of a better word – economy in the making. Arms, legs, organs, tendons and other vital for animation materials are being smuggled about, right under your humble servants' nasal orifices. And this… smuggling ring is benefiting from the so-far disregarded and ignored jurisdiction of the Morticians. This is a direct assault least of all to your servants' function, but also to your own influence and person, not to mention the decency of our Lord's ethics.

Yet again, I must implore you to take action and humbly request your immediate assistance in this matter. These materials are yours by right. There is talk among the Morticians that a guild should be formed, safeguarding the resources under their jurisdiction and control. We cannot allow all decency to be brushed aside.

While I await for your instructions, I have taken the liberty to repair and hastily equip some former members of the militia, mandating them with the protection of the charnel houses. I hope that said decision will be ratified by your response and actions.

I most eagerly await for your response and approval of this urgent matter,

Xalourios, Head Mortician.

Fate of the Centaurs: the Prodromoi & the Kerykes: When it came to the vast empire that was the Dominion of Hazlia, a tapestry of nations and differing cultures under a single rule, there was one constant that defined all of its citizenry: faith. Yet not all who called Hazlia's empire their home were fortunate enough to possess the gift of faith, for non-believers were relatively sparse yet stubborn in their refusal to acknowledge the all-mighty Pantokrator. One such group existed within the ranks of the Bred: inserted into the folds of the Dominion by the Spires, the Centaurs never acquired the sense of belief and faith that permeated everyone around them.

Stemming from their refusal to embrace and adopt the religious creed of the Dominion, the Centaurs at large were pushed to the very margins of civilization, creating nomadic societies that existed in relative isolation. Stubborn, brutish and unruly by nature, the very existence of these unabsorbable Centaur tribes was seen as a nuisance by many within the Dominion, for the persistent Bred would often partake in detestable acts such as stealing, raiding, and even killing. As such, the institution of the Kerykes was born, forging a role for the Centaurs within the Dominion that took free will out of the equation. Kerykes were Centaurs that were taken by the Dominion at a young age, often through violent means, and were raised to become temple messengers. Extensively trained in the ways of war and faith from childhood, Kerykes would become lethal and efficient messengers, carrying communications over vast distances and using their immense speed and military prowess to protect such parcels. However, the second component of the Kerykes' training never really materialized as it was intended: though faithful to Hazlia on the surface, none of the Kerykes ever truly believed in him earnestly – for their natural proclivities made the very concept of faith incomprehensible and impossible to their minds.

As the Fall slowly began to unfold, the Centaur tribes were one of the few groups within the crumbling Dominion that managed to thrive despite all odds, their distance from civilized society proving a saving grace during the societal collapse around them. In fact, with the Legions disbanded, Hazlia gone, his Church in disarray and unrest having descended into open civil war, their physical fortitude and unyielding nature made them ideal mercenaries. Despite of the prosecution initiated against the Bred during the latest decades of the Dominion, many wealthy and powerful humans sought to acquire their services and pit them against their enemies. Their

initial approach, ‘serve or suffer the purge’, was met by the characteristic stubbornness of the Centaurs. Eventually, however, a new approach was discovered: bribery. With generous amounts of materials and gold to counterbalance the threat of the purge, the choice proved easy. Thus, certain Centaur population numbers were sheltered from the purge of the Bred, creating a new institution – the Prodromoi. Lacking the finesse and official training of their Kerykes peers, who often used bows and dexterous blades to quickly dispose of their enemies, the Prodromoi were more brutal and blunt, using overwhelming close quarters force to dispose of those that stood against them. Languishing in the violence they spread and the riches that came from it, the Prodromoi became a notable force during the times of the Fall, serving those with the coin and means that were able to satisfy their hefty fees and shelter them from prosecution.

And yet, the persistent faithlessness and non-belief of the Centaurs that lasted centuries, was meant to crumble. When Hazlia fell from his sky-bound domain and plummeted into Death’s lifeless embrace, he – quite literally – tore open the very heavens with the cataclysmic ferocity of his death throes. The earth shook, and the sky was torn asunder, revealing the plummeting wreckage of a dying god – the same god their forefathers had been denying for generations. Only then, when the very thing they had refused to acknowledge and venerate descended towards them from above, did their denial turn into true, unfiltered and unquestioning belief. Much like the rest of the Dominion’s population around them, the Centaurs prayed for salvation – and Hazlia answered beyond death… While most who serve in the legions of the Old Dominion are mummified husks of their living selves – for faith in life is required to be raised into undeath, and countless faithful existed throughout the reign of the Dominion – such is not the case with the Centaurs. Those Kerykes and Prodromoi that were blessed with unlife were those that became faithful to him during his fall, having no time to decay and wither and being raised almost immediately after their death. As such, they now serve the Old Dominion with a most unique honor, belonging to the chosen few that retain their flesh-bound form while they venture further into unlife…

3. The Spires

Introduction: Scattered throughout the land as if by the hand of a mad god, the Spires dominate the landscape they stand upon. Rising thousands of feet into the air, they are the source of countless suppositions, tales and myths. The learned know that the Spires house entire populations, the last remnants of a civilization that once dared to span the stars.

The Exiles arrived on Eä countless millennia ago as explorers. Their craft and skill allowed them to breach the vast distances between suns and their vibrant civilization looked for new worlds to colonize. The first Spires were germinated to house a small community of scientists, explorers and surveyors, who spent centuries in isolation, studying the planet and preparing the way for a wave of settlers, who would tame the primordial land they had discovered.

They never arrived. Instead a growing stream of refugees began to arrive fleeing a calamity the Spires will not speak of to this day.

Last among the refugees were the nobles of the Sovereign House, who sealed the Ways behind them. This ruthless act, calculated to eliminate all nobility but his House and its Lineages, doomed countless millions they abandoned to die. The magnitude of this betrayal shattered Exile society to its core. As political opposition raged and entire castes turned against their leadership, three factions were born from the ashes of that once great civilization: the Spires, the Weavers and the Quiet. Only among the Spires are the flames of the old civilization kept alive, and even that, only through great sacrifice.

Following the loss of their population, the Sovereign House was forced to turn to the darkest of arts to recreate a pale shadow of the society they had shattered. Without the strictures of religious supervision or the ethical oversight of their own population, the scientists pooled their resources and genius into a single Directorate, and turned the holy gift of Life-Binding into the soulless art of Biomancy. True clones were only the first of the dark miracles they produced to replace the shattered population of the Spires and re-establish their economy.

In a matter of decades, the Spire society was rebuilt from the ground up, but as the clone population grew and the reliance of the economy shifted to the products of the growth vats and spawning pools, the Sovereign House began to fear the growing influence of an increasingly assertive Directorate. Cloned troops, primed from the very flesh of the nobility and bred specifically for loyalty, were deployed to place the Directorate under custody and end the threat before it ever manifested. Cold, calculating and methodical, the Directorate had learnt their lesson in betrayal long ago, along with the Quiet and the Weavers, and had spent almost a century preparing for their coup. They surrendered peacefully… and watched the economy collapse.

Without their expertise, the proper balance in the delicate internal ecosystems of the Spire could not be sustained and quickly collapsed. When the Sovereign House was forced to approach them, the Directorate agreed to a division of power along the lines of the millennia old agreements, between the scientific pioneers who had first set foot upon this world and the nobles who had funded them: the wealth of the land belongs to the nobles, but operational control rests with the Directorate. Furthermore, the Directorate must devote its biomantic products to the Reclamation of the homelands. Once reclaimed, the Sovereign House will cede all local holdings and claims on Eä to the Directorate, in recognition of their invaluable assistance.

As a result, what would normally have been an antagonistic relationship has become a fraught partnership: the Lineages in the Sovereign House seek to influence the Directorate with funding for pet projects and pure research, in return for policies and regulations that benefit them at the expense of their peers.

These delicate balances have been disrupted of late by the rise of the Merchant Princes. Members of the younger dynasties, these mavericks have taken to securing resources by trading directly with the outside world, bypassing the main tool of control and influence of the Sovereign House. The Directorate was originally keen on creating competition but is regretting their decision to endorse these newcomers, as the fragile power balances that bound the Spires for millennia unravel. Trade and contact with the outside has introduced a new and volatile element into the machinations of the Spires, which have started spilling over into the lands around them. With uncertainty and greed reigning unchecked, it is only a matter of time before an errant deed sparks the conflagration of war with the younger races.

In times of war, the Spires today remain one of the most potent powers on the planet. While the territory they control is very limited, the power they can project is vast. Their armies are spawned directly from accumulated biomass and mineral resources that their root networks have secured throughout their millennia of rule. The bitter lessons learnt in the loss of their home world have taught them to concentrate on efficiency rather than raw power when assembling their forces. This philosophy of efficiency pervades even their military thinking. With no ethical concerns to constrain their decisions (their troops are, after all, merely clones), Spire commanders routinely make decisions of breathtaking cruelty, perfectly willing to sacrifice entire armies to trap and destroy the opponent.

Sub-Factions

The Sovereign Lineages: It would be easy to dismiss the Sovereign House as the fossilized remnant of a dead civilization. Their pointless posturing, their ostentatious displays of wealth and power, their mindless and cruel political games, they all point to a state of degeneracy and waste that would cripple any other governing body. All these observations, however, fail to take into account their single greatest achievement: Survival. The Sovereign House has survived the loss of their homeland, the Exodus, the rage of Dragons and the disintegration of their civilization. Somehow, they have managed to adapt, evolve and overcome all obstacles before them, and still emerge on top.

Though few would acknowledge it, the current arrangement with the Directorate suits the Sovereign House perfectly. Blinded by the transient promise of power, the ambitious youth of each Lineage devotes its energies to joining the Directorate, freeing the eldest among the Sovereign House to focus on their true objective. For countless millennia the Lineages have amassed resources and honed their forces with but one objective: the reclamation of their long lost ancestral lands.

Spurred by their Sovereign, that elusive yet terrifying figure that rules over them with an iron fist, the bitter memory of defeat and humiliation has helped the Lineages to keep their focus on recovering their lost lands. In preparation for this momentous event, they have hoarded the vast majority of the resources, that the Spires have harvested across millennia.

To further their efforts in the Reclamation, the Linages of the Sovereign House vie for prestige and influence by funding the creation of ever deadlier and more efficient warriors. Month long tournaments are sponsored by the Sovereign, where each Lineage can display its prized war beasts in brutal challenges that serve to entertain and distract the nobility in times of peace.

Over the course of countless years of debauched blood sports, they have honed their personal forces into formidable fighting machines geared towards this single, explosive release, intended to sweep their ancient Enemy from the promised lands. This most recent fracas with the Merchant Princes is but a small diversion, a long-awaited chance to pit their honed forces against the hapless inhabitants of this realm.

The Directorate: The Directorate exhibits the same brutal ruthlessness of the Sovereign House, but weighs it with the cold pragmatism of their hallowed scientific method. The remarkably transparent and open selection process to a Directorate seat can make the politics within a Lineage change very quickly. Shunned members or obscure family lines can rise to prominence with a single appointment, while established family lines can wither if they fail to secure seats within the Directorate. The fluid nature of intra Lineage politics also deeply affects inter Lineage politics, with frequent betrayals, reverses and assassinations keeping the nobles focused on their game, just like the Directorate originally envisioned.

In contrast, the Directorate seems to play the role the Sovereign House expects them to, without too much friction. Honed by the principles of their Biomancy, they display tremendous patience, observing the shifts and trends in the balance of power with a clinical detachment, adapting to the prevailing political environment with as little disruption as possible. Some Directors, particularly amongst the youngest generation, see this as a sign of subservience and perhaps they are right. Their elders, however, have been playing this game for millennia. They have already won this round, wresting control of the Spires from the Sovereign House, and are focusing on the next. With limited resources at their disposal, every move today is aimed at a result not a few years from now, but decades in the future, when they finally inherit Eä, free of control from the Sovereign.

Particularly unimpressed with the Lineages' fixation on the lost lands, the Directorate pursue instead entirely different goals that will ensure their freedom. On Eä, the Directorate broke from millennia of tradition and started charting their own path, evolving the stifling practice of Life-Binding into the wonder of Biomancy. And it is on this world that they intend to claim their destiny, free of the manipulations and governorship of the Sovereign House and its Lineages, and soon thereafter free of any who might remain on this world to challenge their claim.

While, unlike the Sovereign House, the Directorate does not have endless resources to marshal in the furtherance of their schemes, many of their greatest creations are at the behest of the Lineages. As a result, when a Biomancer is seen on the battlefield, he is often leading the strangest, and deadliest, creations his twisted genius and the endless resources of the Sovereign House can create.

The Underspire: Nestled underground beneath tons of hard packed dirt and the tough fibrous ganglia of the Spire itself, the Underspire protected the most essential processes of the Spires from the depredations of the Dragons and shielded its inhabitants. As the Dragon War ended, the thin atmosphere and sharp sunlight of the upper reaches of the Spire called to the members of the Sovereign House with their memories of their homeland. Within a few short years of their defeat, the Lineages had relocated to the highest portions of the Spires.

Loath to leave the central biotic systems of the spire and the vast spawning pools that were the source of their newfound power, the Directorate soon realized that mingling with the Lineages brought influence, prestige and resources.

In time, its senior members moved to the Upper Spires to engage with the Sovereign House directly. Slowly but steadily, the Underspire was left for the lowest of the Directorate's menials, the Pheromancers.

Incapable of, or often barred from, practicing the more advanced levels of Biomancy, Pheromancers resort to the crude manipulation of ingested biomass to create scents and pheromones. These allow them to command and guide the basic systems of the Spires, as well as the simplest and most animalistic of drones. Coded into powerful scents, the Pheromantic compulsions can bypass the rudimentary cognitive functions of these drones, stifling all thoughts of self-preservation or natural instinct and turning even the unruliest of drones into a nightmare on the battlefield.

With growing reports of missing drones and dire warnings of a proto-religion growing within their ranks falling upon the deaf ears of the Pheromancers' distant superiors, it is quickly becoming clear that the Upper Spire may have forgotten just how critical the Underspire is for the safety and prosperity of the Spire as a whole. Despite their growing concerns, fear of upsetting their superiors and being punished or, worse, denied a vital promotion, keeps most Pheromancers from voicing their concerns openly. As a result, shadows in the Underspire are becoming a little darker every day, and the Pheromancers grow more desperate to prove themselves and escape.

Spotlight

Character Portrait, Faded Magenta: Faded Magenta – Report #3251
Classification: CONFIDENTIAL – URGENT
Page 1/2

Director,

In continuation to Reports ## 3250, 3247, 3209, 3208 and 3181, further behavioral irregularities among the Drone creations have been reported and observed:

- The existence of a new Root on Drone Hub 42 was never brought to my person's attention by the Hub's Drones. The new root channel is expanding behind one of the

Stasis Belts however markings were detected upon inspection. The pattern resembled an attempt to imitate a carapace number, possibly 0113. While examining the finding, Drone #4215 ceased performing its assigned task (Vat Maintenance) to observe my person.

- The carapaces of Drones #4613 and #4652 were damaged in almost identical positions, on the front side of the left shoulder, with a single short line. The depth of the line suggests effort and rules out accidental damage.
- During an inspection of Root Channel 32, unplanned and unauthorized fungi cultivations were detected near a Filtering Valve. Locally assigned Drone #3215 was ordered to remove the fungi and cleanse the Channel as per standard procedure. Drone #3215 displayed reluctance to follow this command until pheromantically instructed to do so under the direct supervision of my person. Its lacrimal glands were activated while performing the task. This was feasibly a defensive reaction to the spores of the fungi.
- During an unscheduled inspection, all active Drones in Hub 60 (Series 6) were found gathered on one side of the Hub, hissing in attempted coordination. This attempt immediately ceased once my person's presence was noticed and all Drones turned their heads to observe. The Drones were post haste pheromantically ordered to rest.

It is my person's assessment that URGENT and DRASTIC action is required and my person would kindly but urgently request the following:

- Authorize the transfer of my person to reevaluate the mammal strands on the design of Drone Series 0, 3, 4 and 6, particularly the limbic system and frontal lobe evolution-blocks in place.

Additionally/Alternatively:

- Authorize the halt of production and the discontinuation of Active Drones from Series 0, 3, 4 and 6 until such a reevaluation is performed by parties assigned by the Director, as their recycled material may compromise future production designs.

Additionally/Alternatively:

- Assign an additional Pheromantic Overseer to Hubs 31 to 60 to enhance monitoring and assign a Clone to enhance security and control of the erratic population, as suggested previously in Reports

The Arena: *That is my skull*', the Indigo Imperative panicked before pain took over, swallowing the spreading cracks that thundered in his mind.

The third weapon had come out of nowhere. Swinging his weapon wildly to force his opponent away, he moved awkwardly backwards with faltering steps. The first thing he felt when the pain allowed it, was his wet temple being chilled by the wind, so the first thought

he had was that the helmet had held, but cracked open. The second was that he had almost died like a mindless drone.

A snicker came from his opponent, taunting, mocking. He had known about the two retracting claws. He had known but the Mimetic had forced it out of his mind. It had fought defensively, leaping away, barely deflecting his blade, whenever he had managed to come in range. The fight had gone on like this for a long time, his confidence growing with every swing. The Mimetic had shrieked and hissed with every dodge and parry, his moves almost panicked near the end. And all the while, he now realized, he had been growing angrier, more aggressive, more confident, ignoring his training and simply aiming for the kill. The cheers of his Master's followers urged him on, roaring waves of voices rising at his every swing.

Now silence reigned beyond his pants, broken by the odd mocking cry from his opponent's supporters and the gurgling snickers of the Mimetic before him. Surges of pheromantic emotions fell upon him from the crowd like landslides, threatening to crash his own feelings. The pain had stolen his focus and opened his perception to them and only then did he realize the reason he had felt so certain of his victory, the reason he had been so reckless. Much like the retracting claws, he had known about this trick too. He had known but he had fallen prey to it anyway. Even now the Mimetic's emissions were urging him, reassuring him of his victory, before they changed, feeding him fear and despair.

He almost fell prey to it once more. His salvation came from where it always did. Among the waves the crowd was throwing at him – anger, mockery, disgust, hatred – he singled one out: disappointment. His Master's disappointment. He dared a quick glance at the balcony and saw him sitting there, silent, expressionless next to the Directorate's Biomancer that had pitted this Mimetic against him.

The Indigo Imperative looked at the Mimetic. Enough tricks. Enough games. This was war, much like the war his Master had started with the humans. A war to silence doubt, a war to stay in control, a war to establish his young Master as a force to be reckoned with, a power to be feared.

A war he would win on his own.

He took a defensive stance, as the Mimetic jumped at him hissing like an animal, four blades flashing with murderous intent.

Character Portrait, The Alchemist: *To His Majesty, the King of Degstradt*
13th day of Noctima
The Year of Redemption 658

Blessings upon thee Your Majesty,

His Eminence was pleased to hear that the funds and resources provided by our benefactor have reached you safely. He also requires of me to inform you that reinforcements are already riding

to your Kingdom from Silisia. While definitely aware of some of our movements, King Fredrik's attention remains focused on the Spire. He has allocated a lot of time, effort and resources in discovering more information about the demons of Nepenthe. His Eminence finds it prudent that I relay such information as I can on the matter; once Your Majesty's divine mission is accomplished and the lands of Brandengrad are thine, Your Majesty must be prepared for an inevitable confrontation with Nepenthe.

We have managed to copy some notes of the various post-mortem examinations Fredrik's men have performed. I have enclosed them in this letter so you can study them at Your Majesty's leisure. I must apologize for failing to deliver more; the supervision of the examinations has been assigned to one Sir Wildegraf of Ren, an accursed templier, and infiltration has proved difficult. You will be pleased to know, however, Your Majesty, that we have gathered enough evidence and I have men ready testify if so asked that the murderous King has been using Mages regularly; these are two graduates of the Pool of Stillness, not renegades, but such things can easily be presented in a favorable light. Their task has been to use their foul magic to observe the demons of Nepenthe in general and gather information on the King's adversary, the demon called "The Alchemist".

As Your Majesty recalls, our agents suspected that the Alchemist belongs to the nobility of his people, what the Dominion texts provided by His Eminence describe as "Lineages". While this has now been confirmed, it is strongly suspected that the Alchemist does not hold such a high station of power in his society as previously believed and his allegiance to the Lineages should be considered suspect for two reasons.

Firstly, in their vast majority, the Spire forces remain within the confines of Nepenthe, despite Fredrik's deployments around it. While the Destruction of Vatsdam may be partly responsible for this hesitation on Nepenthe's part, a report intercepted earlier this month claims skirmishes are taking place inside the halls of the Spire. This could very well mean that the Alchemist's enemies strike when they perceive him weaker but one must consider the possibility that some of his actions were unsanctioned and his shortcoming in Vatsdam made it impossible to overlook them.

Secondly, monstrous activity has increased far beyond the fables of "the Monsters of Nepenthe" and has prevented close observation. It is possible, or so the heretic Aelomancers suspect, that these are creations of the Alchemist himself, set loose to keep scouts at bay while the actual military forces under his command are occupied with internal struggles. If this is true, then the Alchemist must be acknowledged as a master performer of the Spire craft. This, again, should be considered an oddity; such mastery of complex creations is usually connected to another group of influence in Spire socie

"Cease."

The man stopped writing. The pen danced awkwardly in trembling fingers. It had that effect, the eerie, high-pitched voice, dressed with distant whispering echoes and growls, as if more mouths than one spoke at the same time.

“Amend the previous sentence” the voice spoke again. “Vanity must not be allowed to be detectable even as pride must be subtly hinted at.”

The man nodded hesitantly but picked a new piece of parchment nonetheless. He let a heavy sigh to release tension and steady his hand then started writing from the beginning.

“Is… is any of it true?” he asked, once he finished and offered the letter for inspection.

“Every word” the figure replied after a moment.

“Then… I don’t understand” the man went on. “Why give out such infor….” His words faltered and were lost, his eyes betraying his sudden lack of focus. The figure had gotten up from the shadowed corner of his armchair but that too seemed to leave the man indifferent. Licking his lips nervously, eagerly, his gaze was pinned on the small bottle the figure produced from somewhere deep inside its heavy robes.

“Such a curious little biped” the voice muttered to its self, as it left the bottle of the table. The man gestured dispelling evil but all too quickly. Once the figure was gone, he snatched the bottle and opened it with trembling hands.

Character Portrait, the Fractured Concord:

The Fractured Concord Paradox:

Elimination of a Manifested Impossibility

by Furtive Rancor

Forward

A Study on the Fractured Concord is nothing novel. Numerous esteemed members of the Directorate, as well as rival Lineages to its own, have requisitioned plentiful before this one, approaching the issue from different perspectives. After all, its actuality excites too many fields of interest, for reasons all too evident to those familiar with its paradoxal existence. For those of this Researcher’s esteemed patrons that are not, a concise reiteration of the facts will be attempted in this forward.

The Subject’s true moniker was “Shade of Vermillion” and it was the youngest pure of the Vermillion Lineage to have survived the Calamity. It was originally assigned as a Liaison in the Scarlet Spire but following the Betrayal, its record during the Calamity and its military mindset ensured its transfer to the Observation Units that monitored the Traitors. There it remained until the rise of the hominid civilization, when the Shade of Vermillion was recalled. While unconfirmed, it can be safely presumed that its first assignment to the Avatara Project occurred

at that time. While there are claims that would have the Sovereign having ensured this assignment, no such records have been found to date. Such claims are repeated here because the opposite is also positive: no records of the Avatara Project exist to disprove the hypothesis. It is, however, a matter of public record that the Shade of Vermillion's Avatara was fielded on multiple occasions during the unrests of the time of Hominid Decline and in fact one was destroyed to the effects of the Deicide.

Two native centuries after the Deicide, a Sovereign Mandate demanded the transfer of resources from the eastern Spires to the West and the Vermillion Lineage were assigned as Task Overseers. Among the escort forces of the mobile Container Vats were six Avatara units. The Shade of Vermillion was operating one of them along with five other Avatara handlers. Their bodies were being transferred into the sealed Container Vats to secure their continuation, while they remained within the projection range of their Avataras at all times. Inside each of the Container Vats, a Mimetic Assassin was put as a last line of defense. However, repurposed by party or parties unknown, all six Mimetic Assassins discontinued their wards. In conjunction with the other five Avatara handlers, the Shade of Vermillion was terminated. Unlike the other five, it was not eliminated. Its projection remained in the Avatara, despite its body's discontinuation.

This unprecedented and unrepeated event became known as the Fractured Concord Paradox.

Starting with the legitimacy of its existence under regulations, the continuing existence of the Shade of Vermillion has been the subject of multiple debates, studies and theories. A number of those are indeed often quoted and used as guidance in this study. Others, of diminished scientific value, explore the effects of this existence on the mental capacity, or even the psyche, of the Subject and have been ignored. There is a certain element of fear present in discussions concerning the Subject, defying reason and evidence: Its mastery over use of the Avataras is unsurpassed. Its lack of physical manifestation means it can project anywhere, casting its consciousness on any empty host, in any Spire. It has adopted the techniques and mindset of the Traitors and used Life-Binding with its Avatara; that is how it persisted. It can project on multiple hosts, fracturing its mind. And so on and so forth.

The facts of its existence however are these: the Shade of Vermillion was formally terminated since the destruction of its body, yet its consciousness persists within Avatara husks. Its existence was recognized under the moniker of the Fractured Concord and it is stationed as a Military Overseer in Haustellum. Despite its unique relation to the Avatara project, there are enough public indications that it enjoys the Sovereign's tolerance, even favor, which has seemingly ensured the Fractured Concord's absolute loyalty – or vice versa. It is able to transfer between Avatara husks and in fact has been terminated three times already in this manner. While it is theorized that these Avatara need specific preparation, the specifics and procedures of this method remain unknown. There is no solid and confirmed information about the details of its condition.

Despite the lack of facts, as requested by this Researcher's patrons, this study will explore the methods in which the Paradox could be ended and the Fractured Concord accurately and conclusively eliminated.

Sovereign of Interference:

Sovereign of Interference
by Anonymous

[…]
It is no coincidence that many Dweghom Holds suffered a series of tumultuous and bloody changes in their regimes at the time of Charles Armatellum's early career. It must be considered as part of the principal reality of the Dweghom existence; radical changes in the world were always resonating on Dweghom hearts, their primordial predisposition making them much more sensitive to any disturbance to the balances (or imbalances) of Eä. Ghe'Domn nearly reached its own self-desruction at that time, its various clans locked in a war that rarely had an equal and laid the foundation for the departure of three clans, a scant few centuries later. Gholond's Raegh was violently dethroned – an event not remarkable in itself, but made so by the fact that he was killed by a Mnemancer Initiate. The Three-of-Kin, Aul'Domn, Orobdhuo and Uosiega, rekindled their ages-all differences for… a rock, and clashed en masse, albeit the war was quickly contained.

It is also no coincidence that many small Dweghom warbands marched to the surface at the time – which was conveniently forgotten by most humans. The reason? Charles suffered one of the few defeats of his recorded life by such a force from Enurek, which almost jeopardized his entire campaign against the City States, as they blocked the passages through the western Albinae. His loss was a blessing in disguise – after all, Charles was a more learned man than most and he was always being properly advised – for a victory over the Dweghom could have started a chain reaction of challenges against this human. Some also attribute the direct involvement of Svarthgalm as well as the increased aggression of the Nords to Charles' rise. This is true but only indirectly so; unlike Charles, Svarthgalm was naturally predisposed to march in the opposite direction of any sage advice he was being offered.

But unlike the Nords and the Dweghom, there was another force that turned its eyes to this young King already at that time; one much more focused, dangerous and cunning. In the scattered Spires around the world, an increased number of licenses to Merchant Princes would be issued just as a young Charles was solidifying his rule in the newly founded Austersia.

This, of course, raises multiple questions. Could anyone, the Sovereign included, have

predicted so early the future of Charles Martell? He was not, after all, the only human king or queen to exploit a volatile situation to expand the borders of their influence. While, granted, Charles' success was promising to be unprecedented, the Sovereign's reaction would seem too immediate to the very hint of Charles' greatness. Considering the volatility of the times, with the Kingdoms boiling in the cauldron of the Red Years, one man's successes seem hardly worthy of the Sovereign's attention, while leaving little room for certainty of predictions, even to such as capable as he. This leaves two possible interpretations.

Coincidence cannot be readily dismissed. The intricacies of the Spire politics elude history's records and one could safely assume that, much like the Kingdoms, Nords and Dweghom experienced unrest at the time, so did the Spires. The Sovereign's decision to increase the number of licenses could very well be a reaction to internal agitations, or even to some challenge. It is conceivable, therefore, that the Sovereign's decision was irrelevant at the time and simply overlapped another significant event.
That being said, it is hard to imagine that the Sovereign did not thoroughly understand how his people would infiltrate human society as a direct result of such licenses and the timing seems too opportune to be coincidental. While undoubtedly the absence of a "divine" being such as Hazlia diminished the possible threat, the Exiles had every interest to remain informed about the affairs of a unified human dominion. At the same time, however, was there really even a hint of such a unification at the time, even to the most imaginative and cunning eyes? While this seems to suggest that the theory of coincidence should be considered prevalent, one cannot but wonder if this indeed was the Sovereign reacting; not to a possibility of the future, however, but to the revelation of weaknesses in his own machinations.

The key to this theory is location. Charles' early exploits were taking place far from the influence of Spires; the closest Spire was the Thurible and, considering the mobility of Enurek, it is hard to imagine that the Spire would not concentrate more on that much more immediate threat – the destruction of the Exile Campaign, after all, was too recent by Exile standards. Speaking of the Thurible, if one accepted that the Sovereign had been long monitoring human exploits, one would presume that a new faith advocating unification under one creed would have been much more alarming – but the Thurible offered insight into its limitations. Charles' exploits, however, far from the confines of his subjects' Spires, revealed that his eyes and ears were limited. There were blind spots in his web of observation and the Sovereign would not abide this. If it was no coincidence, therefore, the increase of licenses reflected not the Sovereign's unparalleled foresight nor a reaction to Charles himself. It was an acknowledgement and correction of faults, a recognition of the fact that the Sovereign knew too little rather than more than the rest of the world.

Both above theories, must be noted, are the optimistic scenarios. A more dire theory, connected to the second one, would suggest that it was not limited means of observation that irked the Sovereign; it was lack of tools of interference. Johanna of Lor was inexplicably burned in her own tent, before she finished her conquer of Galania during the War of the Lilies. Willhelm of Haubach was killed in combat conquering Riismark, yet none came forward to be rewarded for the deed. Piotr the Grand was shot during a hunt, right at the dawn of his campaign to unite the three Principalities. A suspicious mind would dare imagine the unimaginable…

Surely, this is purely speculation. After all, Charles' rise to power, and the continuation and expansion of his legacy by his House, was never halted or even impeded by the actions of the Spires – save, perhaps, for history's large question mark hanging over Otto IV's assassination, nearly three centuries later. […]

The Living World of Faded Magenta: *(This is a summary of Faded Magenta's story during the first part of the Living World storyline. You can see the expanded version by visiting the Living World and browsing through past choices, at the bottom of the character's banner. You can also see Faded Magenta's Portrait here.)*

With a series of reports about erratic and disturbing behavior of certain Drone series being dismissed repeatedly, Faded Magenta decided to disobey the orders of the Lineages and cull the entire population of erratic series. Interrupted by an unnamed Directorate agent, he was offered an alternative: to leave enough erratic samples alive to observe, while forging numbers in reports to appease the Lineages. His new, mysterious patron offered one of his clones for protection – or, more likely, to monitor him closely.

Regardless of his suspicions, Faded Magenta decided to go on with his observations, as agreed with his patron, choosing to isolate the Flawed population from the non-erratic drones. This, he believed, would allow for the erratic behaviors to develop further. He soon observed that the "Flawed" behaviors expanded beyond his expectation, though he could not explain how or why yet. His efforts were interrupted by the announcement of an inspection.

Fearful that the Inspector would discover his crimes, he acted alone, sidetracking his Clone protector and attempting to keep his patron in the dark about his plans. He arranged for an "accident" with an erratic drone: blocking a Brute's pheromantic receptors to all but his personal emissions, he had the massive drone delete the Inspector while he remained safe. With his last breath, the Inspector revealed that this drastic action was unnecessary; he too was serving the Faded Magenta's patron.

Deciding to own to his mistake and attempt to present it as a sign of his capabilities, he kept the Brute alive and readily assumed blame. His patron was less than understanding, promising that one day the Faded Magenta would better learn the politics of the Higher Spire and, with his talents, would eventually excel. But not yet. What was worse, the patron was demanding – in

not so many words – that all notes about his unique method of controlling the Brute Drone during the arranged accident were delivered onto them. Torn between anger for being dismissed as a mere Pheromancer despite his accomplishment with the Brute and fear for a prospectless existence in the Underspire, Faded Magenta decided to embrace the image others had of him: a lowly, dimwitted Pheromancer that did not know any better.

Drowning his patron in a series of detailed but largely trivial or deflecting reports, Faded Magenta turned the very system that had buried him in the Underspire against his would-be controllers. Invoking obscure but yet valid bureaucratic concerns, he delayed the termination of the Brute, and therefore the presentation of any meaningful post-deletion analysis, long enough for him to secretly switch carapaces and therefore the Brute's identity. At the same time, he kept all important notes and methods about his work to himself, until, eventually, his patron absentmindedly dismissed him as a useful tool and his "protector" Clone departed. Alone at long last, Faded Magenta eagerly resumed his old life. Almost. Choosing to ignore the Flawed drones and instead concentrate on his own research: a method of tailoring drone receptors to a specific person's pheromantic emissions, thus excluding control by others – an illegal field of research.

Eventually, the Brute, named Mass, proved a loyal companion, company and valuable research asset. It's short life span, extended as much as he dared before venturing into further illegal practices, was swiftly coming to an end. Deciding on the value of a post-expiration above the silent company Mass offered, Faded Magenta allowed his pet-Brute's existence to expire. In a moment of weakness and sentimentality, he thanked the expired Mass – not realizing he was being watched by Flawed Drones.

Throwing himself to his work, Faded Magenta balanced precariously between maintaining the image of a dutiful but not always successful Pheromancer to avoid drawing attention and secretly continuing his personal research. Progress proved very slow – for, loathe as he was to admit it, he *was* a lowly Pheromancer – and exhaustion often overcame him, as he worked almost without rest. One such sleepless night, he realized he was being watched. As a group of Flawed drones had gathered outside his laboratory despite their directives, Faded Magenta threw caution to the wind and approached them.

Terrified and barely able to contain his panic, he heard one of the drones attempting to speak, mimicking the words he had once said to Mass: thank you.

Some time later, reports ceased to arrive from Pheromancer Faded Magenta. None knew what had happened. None cared. Without ever attempting to search for him, a replacement, Surmounting Principal, was sent to fulfill his duties. Soon after a report signed by said Pheromancer was submitted, in which it was revealed that Faded Magenta had expired and his equipment had been rendered useless. With the report out of the way, the Pheromancer turned to a drone, addressed him as 'Faulty' and underlined the success of faking one's own death.

Officially dead to the Upper Levels and assisted by his Flawed drones, Faded Magenta carried on with his plans undisturbed.

4. Dweghom

Introduction: The Dweghom are the firstborn children of War and their long history is steeped in warfare and loss. Originally crafted by the dragons as a race of peerless craftsmen, their Ancestors were forged to be the ultimate servitors; hardy, industrious, loyal and dedicated to the creation of beauty. Their lifespans were vastly extended and their memories made deep and enduring, so that the secrets of their craft would not be lost from generation to generation. For millennia, they labored for their masters and the Dragons thrived. Matchless artifacts and beautiful relics swelled the Dragon hoards, while the Rooks, the dragons' lairs, were transformed into marvels of architecture and engineering.

Revolts and uprisings were all but unknown, as loyalty had been imprinted into their very essence and they found it impossible to raise weapons against their masters, once one of them joined the fray directly.

Those few rebellions that did occur were swiftly put down, their leaders rounded up and executed, while the followers were exiled to the unforgiving depths of their vast mine networks to toil in the dark and dangerous passages close to Destruction's heart.But the dragons had wrought their craft too well. Those Ancestors who were exiled to the depths were bowed, but far from broken. Their gift of memory stoked the fires of their fury, fueling their determination to bring down their masters. Their tunnels delved ever deeper into the hidden places of the earth, the cool stillness of those dark chambers echoing with their anger as they dug, the quiet slowly giving way to the seething wrath of the planet's core. There, surrounded by a fury and rage that dwarfed even their own, they came across their doom, as well as their salvation. Bound by the Dragons in Primordial Earth and Fire since Eä itself was still young, it had languished in the smothering embrace of his chthonian tomb for eons uncounted, beyond the reach of the mortal races; or so the Dragons thought. Every rage fueled strike of the Ancestors' pickaxes and every angry, shattering blow of their hammers had become a prayer, turning their ordeal into a pilgrimage that burrowed through not only the miles of obdurate stone that separated them, but across the very borders of reality itself, until they stood before the throne and prison of War, the Second Horseman and Incarnate Soul of Destruction.

All Dweghom are taught this memory, Dheureghodh, the Breaking, by their Mnemancers. It was then that the very race and fate of the Dweghom were altered forever, finding the means of their freedom in War's prison and War itself. Physically changed by their sojourn and efforts in War's prison, their bodies swelled with the gifts of Primal Fire and Earth. They became tremendously resistant to fire, heat and its effects also needing far less food and rest that their physiology would otherwise dictate. A remarkably large percentage of the Dweghom population also displays the Gift. Gifted Dweghom are characterized by tremendous potency, but very little control. Some of them see this as a byproduct of the manner in which they came into these

powers; a poisoned gift from a capricious master. A Dweghom who does not master them is doomed to be consumed by them.

Their return from War's prison heralded the end of countless millennia of peace. Gone was the time of short-lived rebellions. This conflict would not be a rebellion, a battle of subjects against their master, but a true War, a contest of equals. Wielding the power and will to shake the very foundations of the world, the Dweghom looked at their creators in the eyes and took the fight to the Dragon Rooks, plunging the whole world into chaos and flame. When the ashes of that conflict finally cooled, only the Dweghom were left standing. Driven by their own unreasoning and bitter pride, they had quenched their fury in the blood of their makers… and their ancestors. Of the Dragon Rooks and their loyal slave population only cinders remained.

Alas, War's teachings resent peace and Memory does not bring unity. In the centuries after the Dragons were eradicated and their slave population destroyed, the Dweghom lost their focus. Sickened by their belligerence, the High King and his family abdicated their leadership. Alone and without a purpose to guide them, the Dweghom called upon their Mnemancers to lay their deeds before them and build their new society. They looked upon their past, their future and each other and promptly disagreed.

The Memory Wars that ensued have never truly ended. Divided by castes, clans and beliefs, the Dweghom walked perilously close to extinction. Only their very survival as a race compelled them to withdraw to their Holds. The scars of this conflict run deep and to this day their civilization is a shattered mosaic of conflict.

Split between the fanatical Ardent, the gifted Tempered and the civilian populous, Dweghom society is riven through and through. Violent confrontations between members of these factions are a common sight, where long standing feuds can spark isolated incidents into full-fledged internecine warfare at a moment's notice. Leadership within each hold rests on a tenuous distribution of responsibilities and power between these three castes, established and held only through a delicate balance of violence, compromise and efficiency, under the supervision and guidance of the Mnemancers. One of the only things the leadership can agree on is that internal conflicts can be set aside in the face of an exterior enemy; as a result, most Dweghom hosts are in a state of perpetual conflict and ever ready to bring War to any brave, or foolish, enough to give them cause.

History

Fall of Dragons: *He could hear it. He could barely hear his own thoughts but this he could hear clearly.*

The metal armor of his troops clanged around him in short crescendos, their fighting yells trying to surpass the clamor of the battle around them. It was not easy. Somewhere in the back, war drums tried desperately to coordinate his men's thirst for blood, combat, revenge, to little avail. Direct orders screamed and enforced even by blows were more readily followed than the drums.

A mental note for the future: once the thrill of battle consumed his men, drums and horns served little. Each warrior became a killing machine, to be channeled by force if necessary. In the meantime, he could feel proud by how readily his officers had adapted to this and were fulfilling their purpose. One of them turned and looked at him, sword raised. She yelled something, pausing mid-sentence as a cannon fired, drowning his voice. Then she had to stop again, as the distinct rattle of a massive chain echoed, bouncing for some time against the sharp, naked rocks prepared around them.

Oh yes, he could hear it..!

Fire roared and rock started splitting with piercing, heavy crack sounds, as rounds for the cannons were prepared all around the battlefield. Realizing it would be impossible to be heard, the officer rushed to his side, ducking by reflex and wincing, as an enemy roared in pain near them. Wincing… This confused him. The duck was a good reflex. But why wince? The distinct sound of spears piercing flesh was heard. Another cannon fired, more chains rattled, another enemy falling. Truly, why wince? Could she not hear it? Amidst the breaking tons of rock, the explosion of cannons and the deafening rattling of enormous chains, amidst the yells and roars of wounding and wounded, amidst all, one sound prevailed and reached his ears with clarity… no. Not amidst, he realized now. It was part of it. All the rest was a symphony that underlined this one, beautiful sound, this salve of satisfaction, focus, purpose.

Dragon death cries.

He barely heard his officer as she was pointing at the Old One ahead and describing the situation.

"HE IS OF EARTH!" she screamed, as he scanned the scene. "OUR FIRE HERE IS TOO LITTLE!" He nodded thoughtful. The plan had worked so far but it would not be long before the Old One could take flight again. It was the trouble with Fire and Earth attuned Old Ones. The Gifts of the Dweghom were matched. But there were solutions. He gave his order but another dragon fell, crashing rocks, a cannon and several of his men under it. The officer leaned closer, wincing again.

"Break the earth where he stands" he said again, this time calmly near her ear. "Break the earth deep, break it until he falls to the lava pits below". Taken aback, she looked at him.

"Our men are there" she muttered. "The Rook won't hold".

The symphony around him endured and he reveled in it, as he pondered on her words. No. She was wrong. It had to be done. The Old One's struggling roars only served to build for the end. The cannons would stop firing. The drums would stop beating. The chains would stop moving. One by one, all other sounds would be silenced, as the long, desperate roar of the Old One falling would lead to the inevitable crescendo of the victory cries of the survivors. He valued his men but there could be no other end.

“They will die!” she added.

Such is War*, he thought.*

“They will die free” he said.

Chamber of War: *“And, broken, the Destroyer spoke and said: “Fools! I may not be stopped, I may never be imprisoned! For to wage war to end me, is to revel and exalt me!” And they listened at his words and they learned and in this endless nature, they saw the makings of his prison, forged from the very elements that shaped him. And pieces of him they took to make it. Fire to burn fire. Metal to hold metal. Magma to shower burning rock. War perpetual, War warring War, War until the end of time. Such was his sin, so such was his punishment. Eternum.”*

– “The Works of the Unborn”, Celestial Bureaucracy Approved Text #653.121

…Every rage fueled strike of the Ancestors’ pickaxes and every angry, shattering blow of their hammers had become a prayer, turning their ordeal into a pilgrimage that burrowed through not only the miles of obdurate stone that separated them, but across the very borders of reality itself, until they stood before the throne and prison of War, the Second Horseman and Incarnate Soul of Destruction.

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deeds before them and build their new society. They looked upon their past, their future and each other and promptly disagreed…

The Shattering: Many have argued over the method and reasoning of what the Ancestors did in War's Chamber, their own descendants more deeply and more violently than any other. But in the end what is known is that from that whirlpool of Primordial powers emerged a race infused with Primordial Earth and Fire, baptized by the very blood and essence of War. Crafters and slaves no more, they were now free warriors: Dweghom.

Fueled by centuries of rage and powerlessness, the Dweghom spent centuries preparing themselves for the conflict they knew was coming. Their return from the deep would herald the end of countless millennia of peace. Gone was the time of short-lived rebellions and ruthless culling. This conflict would not be a rebellion, a battle of subjects against their master, but a true War, a contest of equals. Wielding the power and will to shake the very foundations of the world, the Dweghom would not hesitate to do so.

Driven by the same single-minded intensity that has marked the race since, they knew that the primordial might of the Elder Dragons had to be neutralized first. They struck upon a plan that would see the vast majority of those Elders neutralized before the rebellion began. That this plan would also shatter the world and plunge it into millennia of conflict was of little consequence, for their hatred knew no bounds.

All Works of magic demand a toll from their caster and none, not even the greatest of Dragon sorcerers, is immune to this immutable law. As a result, when a Working is broken, the caster feels it deeply; the greater the Working, and the caster's investment, the greater the pain. Weak or tired casters have been known to die from the magical feedback of one of their Workings being destroyed.

From the dawn of Creation and the Primordial War, no greater Workings than the bindings of the Four Horsemen have been attempted, by mortal or immortal alike. So when the greatest of the Dweghom Gifted gathered at the Chamber of War and in one thunderous detonation breached the containment field that held the imprisoned Primordial, its original casters, the very Eldest of Dragons, were struck a terrible blow. Across Ea, Elder Dragons shuddered and collapsed, the power of their Primordial workings slamming back into their fragile physical bodies, ripping their mortal forms and rendering them helpless to the coming war.

Then the Chamber of War collapsed and the world broke.

Sub-Factions

Ardent: The Tempered would claim the Ardent were born at the foot of War's Throne, where they broke the chains that bound them to their Draconic masters and doomed the Dweghom race to eternal War. The Ardent, however, claim they were born millennia before; the first time

a Dweghom refused to bow before a Dragon and found he could not. In War they saw a promise of freedom, a force so powerful even their master could not control, merely contain.

Driven by their cold pride and thirst for freedom, they were the first to fall upon the bound Primordial, shattering and devouring what they could. In doing so, they broke their masters' chains and took the gift that had been offered to them. No longer would their struggle be a mere rebellion, the conflict of an inferior against a superior, but a contest of equals, a War that would grow to consume the world and finally release the fallen Primordial.

The Ardent ride the violent currents of War with pride, equating any sort of craft aside from this with their millennial slavery to the Dragons. Their initiates are trained from induction in martial craft, tested to their very limits and beyond in preparation for the Dheukorro, the Descent, a pilgrimage following their ancestors path to the Throne of War through the deepest bowels of Eä. In each Dweghom hold there is a pit that plunges so deep into the bowels of the earth that it scratches the surface of Destruction's prison. Here one can almost hear the beating of Destruction's savage heart, the power of his rage bleeding through the miles-thick wall of his eternal prison and setting the very earth afire. Nestled deep within these hellish tunnels rests the breached chamber that once imprisoned War itself and fueled the emancipation of the Dweghom.

It is the sacred duty of every member of the Ardent to descend through these tunnels to pay homage to the sacrifice and fortitude of their ancestors. The deeper one descends, the closer he comes to those paragons of old and the greater the initiate's worth; but the greater the danger as well. Deep within the bowels of the earth, the blood of Destruction has changed many of the subterranean denizens into raging monstrosities that prowl the deepest tunnels. Those initiates that survive these encounters emerge as Exemplars, embodiments of War like none other. The fate of the Gifted who undertake the Dheukorro, the Flame Berzerkers and the Stone Sentinels, are part of the price the Ardent pay for their freedom, for nothing can contain their will, not even the limits of own bodies.

To this day, the Ardent defend their decision, embracing the simple truth that life is a struggle and War a way of life. Their militarism is not the blind adoration of the faithful to a savior, but rather the most exalted manifestation of their own freedom. To any who oppose them, the distinction bears little significance, for, of all the Dweghom, none revel in War more than the Ardent; they are its fiercest proponents, ever eager to prove their faith on the field of battle.

Clans: While the castes of the Ardent and the Tempered wrangle over the past and the future of the entire race, the bulk of the Dweghom define its present, forming its living and breathing society. Freed from the burden of sustenance by the tireless work of Dragon automata, the Dweghom view labor as punishment or the task of a slave. Instead, they live their lives in constant effort to display their Aghm, their "weight" or "worth", through deeds. This is no simple vanity, a Dweghom's Aghm is not some vague conceit. It is their social hierarchy, their currency and, some would argue, their reason for being. This peculiar cultural trait is perhaps

only possible due to the incredible capacity for memory the Dweghom possess. Memory and its recording plays a tremendous role in Dweghom culture. Its discipline, Mnemancy, and its practitioners, Mnemancers, playing a central organizational role in Dweghom society.

Taken early on by the Clan and put in communal crèches, every Dweghom is raised as little else than a soldier to the Clan, until they prove themselves. While individuality exists, an individual is not valued until he can prove his worth. All possessions are acquired by reaching the required status within the Clan. Ranging from squad sergeant all the way up to the lofty title of Eldest, status is earned through deeds, for nothing is inherited. All material wealth and power a Dweghom amasses throughout his life is sealed within his chambers upon his death, becoming a memorial to the individual interred within. The greater one's standing, the greater the treasures and chambers upon which he is laid to rest. As a result, the Dweghom are deeply competitive and every issue of social standing is resolved through arbitrated challenges. These can range from simple physical contests between two young, unproven Dweghom, to entire military campaigns when Elders feud. The Mnemancers maintain an immense codex of laws and traditions, which ascribes and quantifies the value of deeds within Dweghom society, outlining the worth of each deed performed and precisely ascribing the Aghm of each member in the Hold, based on the calculations held within. It comes as no surprise to anybody who has met them that the activities with the highest value are all military in nature.

This has created a heartless military regime that drives the standards ever upwards, leaving many at the bottom of the social ladder. While many of these individuals are forgotten and abandoned, it matters not to the Clan, for it becomes ever stronger on the efforts of those who strive and succeed. When the Clan marches, the enemy commander can have no doubt that even the lowliest soldier is a deadly fighter who has earned his right to fight and is deeply motivated prove himself worthy of more.

Tempered: When they encountered the Throne of War, the Tempered, much like the Ardent, saw the future of their people writ large, but not in the awesome power of the hulking Primordial form bound within it, rather in the colossal energies that raged around it. Blinded by pride in their craft, they saw in this elemental prison a power that would ensure the success of their rebellion and secure their future. As the Ardent used the infusion of raw Primordial essence to shatter the chains binding them to the Dragons, the Tempered took advantage of the flux created in their very essence and infused their people with the raw elemental might of the Throne. The powers they dabbled with, however, were completely beyond their measure.

The results of this single momentous act changed the Dwarves and the world forever. Enhanced by War's destructive essence, the raw power of the elements served them well in their victory over the Dragons. In their thirst for power, however, they drew too deeply from the well that maintained the Throne and weakened War's prison. Fractured into a hundred pieces by the Ardent and fed by the growing conflagration of their struggle against the Dragons, War was finally able to break free and has roamed unchecked since. This thought haunts the Tempered above all others to this day. While successful, they believe the plan of their forefathers to have

been ultimately flawed by the very essence of War that rages within them, denying them mastery over their own elemental powers and thus their destiny.

In the Tempered's opinion, the warmongering of the Ardent is evidence enough of this, as is the fate of their Gifted. Unless they control War and the destructive impulses it infused them with the Dweghom are doomed, so it is control they seek. Their powers are bound by elemental grafts, powerful creations especially designed to endure the strain of their raw Elemental might and War's chaotic influence. The limited control their Gifted possess is magnified by these devices, allowing them to unleash their immense destructive powers on the field of battle. For all their effectiveness and awesome power, however, the Tempered consider these machines a crutch to their flawed nature. Their true agenda lies deeper; the reforging of the Dweghom race, building upon the imperfect efforts of their forefathers.

Metal Mages are considered by the Tempered to be the pinnacle of the Dweghom race, as well as its salvation. Gifted equally in Fire and Earth, Metal Mages display a level of control that transcends the simple, if powerful, elemental workings of their less gifted brethren. With their superior control, they meld both powers to create a new one which allows them to treat metals as a separate element. While a Dweghom Pyromancer or Geomancer might accomplish similar feats by exerting force or heat upon a piece of metal, Metal Mages transcend this limitation and simply will it into its new form, allowing them to alter metals directly, shaping them into impossibly fine and precise forms. It is only through this gift that the craft-sorcery of the Dweghom is possible. Metal Mages are the only who possess the precision and control needed to create the grafts that allow Gifted Dweghom to connect to and power the elemental devices that have become ubiquitous throughout their society.

Spotlight

The Hold of Ghe'Domn: One could ask any Clansman of any other Hold and the answer would invariably be the same: Ghe'Domn is… odd. In that regard, it would seem counterproductive for one to explore individual Dweghom Holds starting with Ghe'Domn. While not a typical Hold, however, it is an example of Dweghom culture as a whole, a sample of their mentality as a civilization, instead of a single Clan's, caste's or Hold's.The oddities of Ghe'Domn start in a very obvious manner. Where most if not all other Clans chose to establish their Holds on mountainous ranges, forging gigantic entrances on the slopes of high peaks, often on the ruins of Dragon Rooks, the deathbeds of greater Dragons they had slain or the dwelling places of their forefathers, Ghe'Domn was dug on a valley. Right in the middle of a natural passageway crossing the sharp Zahnügel hills of today's Hermania, a Forefather head was built, a massive structure, rivaling the neighboring hills in size, whose secrets of construction are craved by many a human stonemason to this day. Two gigantic hands made to seem as if they are crawling out of the ground were also built, possibly serving as watchtowers during the Hold's early days, when Clans still fought openly and frequently among themselves.

The Memory of the reasoning behind this choice is not shared anywhere visibly on the Hold's gates. This in itself is another oddity; a Hold's founding Memories are usually a source of pride and boasting, a statement of the founding Clan's strength. Quick to declare weaknesses in others, many a Dweghom from other Holds readily claim that this can only mean that the abomination that is Ghe'Domn is standing proof of a weakling clan, that survived because it hid from combat, both with the Dragons and with other Clans, establishing its Hold far from the battlefields. Others, perhaps more reserved, note that it is not unheard of for one to keep a Memory which hides strength, preserving an advantage for the future, as Memories of the Hold's first Raegh name him a dragon killer proper. Some human researchers on the other hand, speculate based on the symbolism of the structures that the Hold is actually the place where the first of the Dweghom returned, the site of their rise from War's Chamber to the surface. To this, the Dweghom shake their heads, claiming humans always see patterns and symbols where there are none.

Whatever the reasoning, it was the choice of Anaghallosh, Ghe'Domn's founder and first Raegh, to establish his Hold where it is and it was the first of many odd choices that went against what would become Dweghom tradition. Slayer of the Great Dragon Bhaigharrodhakk, Anaghallosh had earned his right to be Raegh of his own Clan through his deeds, much like any other of his station, yet the similarities with the rest of them stopped there. Within a mere century after the end of the open Memory Wars that followed the Dragons, when the Clans retreated to their Holds, Anaghallosh declared that each of his twelve Thanes, who helped him bring down Bhaigharrodhakk and wetted their blades in its blood, would forge and lead their own Clans, within the Hold's Clan*.

This decision ensured a sudden, almost violent burst of population within the Hold. Mirroring the behavior of the entire race, the Thanes led their clans to their corners, as new tunnels and halls were opened with unparalleled speed. Once settled, each clan strived to become stronger, more populated and their warriors better trained than the rest. This, some speculate, was the intention of Anaghallosh. Others speculate it was what, almost inevitably, followed next: a miniature of the Memory Wars of the entire Dweghom race.

It was not long before clan rivalries erupted into skirmishes and even less until the skirmishes led to all-out war between some clans. Ready to expand their influence, such rivalries were constantly fueled by the castes of the Ardent and the Tempered, who sought like-minded Thanes to promote their creeds. Direct involvement of the two castes was rare (it has happened but four times), but two clans or more, often urged by one creed or the other, have always been locked in some form of conflict with each other since then.

The presence of multiple, smaller clans within the Hold Clan, ensured Ghe'Domn's survival and even prosperity, despite the conflicts. This, coupled with its location, made Ghe'Domn the most well-known Hold to humans and its Dweghom the most familiar with their neighbors. Through the occasional surface patrols of one clan or another, Ghe'Domn witnessed the birth and rise of the Hundred Kingdoms firsthand, observing from afar the short lived humans expand. It goes

without saying that when contact inevitably happened, it was bloody. While such skirmishes were limited, they were brutal and one-sided enough to carve the area around Ghe'Domn as hazardous and not fit for settling.

In time, however, some patrols would make limited trades with the humans. Many a story in Hermania speak of the first such occasion, when a Dweghom patrol was lured near a camp by the smell of spiced meat roasting. Whether any of them are true or not, the Dweghom would indeed now and then trade, buying pure spices, sugar and sweets, whose' strong tastes appeal to their kind. In return, they offered useless creations made of weak metals, like gold and silver. While the value humans gave to such trinkets would eventually be understood, many of the rumors about mountains of buried treasures in the Holds originated to those first dealings with Ghe'Domn. They were also, possibly, the birthplace of the lethal misconception that those Holds that never traded were abandoned. Much of what the Hundred Kingdoms know about the Dweghom, limited as it is, was learned by those trades, directly or indirectly.

Still, despite the outwards façade of calm offered by these mostly peaceful dealings, of all the Holds, Ghe'Domn could claim it has the bloodiest history and its Mnemancers have the Memories to prove it. The fights and wars among its small clans have continued without stop; war, either limited or more wide-spread, has been the default situation in the halls of Ghe'Domn. Isolated from the world around it, the clans that Anaghallosh' Thanes founded have seen innumerable heroes and enemies rise and fall, unknown to all but the Dweghom of Ghe'Domn themselves. Three of the original twelve clans are no more, the loss of each signaling the end of Hold-wide war in Ghe'Domn. The fourth such war is ongoing and already it has changed not only the Hold, but perhaps the world as is known.

Ignited by a Thane named Alekhaneros, called Azdhaen, the Fire Thane, for his retinue of Flame Berserkers, Ghe'Domn plunged into a war that no clan or caste escaped. Fueled by his fervent belief in the Ardent creed, while not a member of the caste himself, Alekhaneros tried to unite the Hold and form a Host that would remind the world of the power of the Dweghom. Many disagreed and did so in typical Dweghom manner. Interestingly enough, Alekhaneros seemed not intent on fighting other clans or uniting them by becoming Raegh by force. He took his own clan and two that followed him and marched to the surface, an act that many fear will prompt a response by Dweghom (and not only Dweghom) all over the world.

Ghe'Domn's bloody history is a perfect opportunity for some Dweghom versus Dweghom battles, with a thematic battlefield, primed with special, Dweghom terrain, such as the buildings created by MicroArt Studios. On the other hand, Alekhaneros' small Host includes almost everything in the Dweghom army roster, making his march a chance to pit your Dweghom against any force. His first declared stop was Riismark, where the Spire of Nepenthe and the humans wage war, while his destination is the Hold of Orobdhuo, where Nord ships have landed at their doors, for reasons unknown. While the march from Ghe'Domn to the Claustrine Mountains is long and may prove a challenge even for the Fire Thane, it also provides multiple settings for your terrain along the way.

* *Heĝe* is the word for Clan and describes both the entire Clan of Ghe'Domn and the smaller, Thane Clans. However, there is a difference in both inscribing and pronouncing it, one being *Heĝe* or *Heghe* and the other *Hege.* To any Dweghom outside Ghe'Domn, the word is still the same but *Hege* sounds like a clan with less weight than *Heghe*. This was very likely the effect to his own people, when Anaghallosh first declared his Thanes would lead their own *Hege*.

The Forge Halls: "You are far from the Memory Hold, youth Vodhergodh. And far from the Raegh. This is not your usual manner." Eyes fixed on the works before him and with hands clasped behind his back, the old sorcerer had to shout to be heard above the roars of flames and metal clatters that thundered in the Forge Hold. Once Vodhergodh stood beside him, only then did he turn to look at him. "Are you here to record Memories? Or to share one?"

"Khedhorro deaghm, Eonegdh" Vodhergodh replied, nodding his head slightly, in greeting. They were aimed and purposeful, both his words and nod, treating Eonegdh as an equal and as if the old Sorcerer had done the same, by recognizing his worth on sight. Eanegdh had not and was not inclined to do so now. Turning his head back to the Forges, his hands ever behind his back, he allowed silence to fall between the two.

"We are both advisors to the Raegh, Eonegdh" the Mnemancer said finally but again the Sorcerer seemed to ignore him. Calmly, Vodhergodh went on. "The Raegh would see us all agree on this, before he takes action. If you do not agree, he will not March, I think."

"Share the Memory of the Hold's Automata, Apprentice Mnemancer" came the order, instead of a reply. "Skip the names and dates, save for the Sorcerer and Kerawegh." Furrowing his brows in anger, the young Mnemancer nevertheless obeyed.

"It is remembered that four-dozen and four were the Automata found in the Rook of Ghisghigamosh" he recounted. "It was discussed for three Duties among the Raegh Enh, the Hold's First, and his Thanes, how they would be put to use and one Sorcerer, Azmeudh, and one Kerawegh, Sinhbodh, were consulted. It was decided on the fourth Duty that the Automata would be given to the Tempered to control but their use would be decided by the Ardent in war outside the clan. It came to pass that the Automata were put to use to claim what was useful from the Rook and help with the opening of Halls. It is remembered that on the…"

The Young Mnemancer paused, clearing his throat, before he went on.

"It is remembered that during the next Command, the Brood of the Oppressors assaulted the Clan. It was discussed among the Ardent and the Tempered of how to operate and use the Automata. It was decided by the Ardent that they would be put to war, invoking the order of the Raegh Enh. It was observed *that the Automata were inefficient, slow and passive in war. It came to pass that two-dozen and six were destroyed with little to no effect in combat. It…"*

"Stop" Eonegdh interrupted him "and look and listen" he went on, motioning towards the Forge before him.

He barely contained a smile, as he allowed the discorded clatters and roars of the Forge Halls to take over him. Allowing his Gift to guide his perception, he felt the rivers of molten metal that flowed around them as if they were his own blood coursing through his veins, his thoughts showered in the metal waterfall that splashed into the giant cauldrons and his heart pounded in the rhythm of the pounding metal being shaped in the ancient forges. Fire glow nested and grew in his eyes until they seemed aflame themselves and his hair started moving by an unseen air, like dancing fire in a roaring forge. Calm, almost passive, the young Dweghom next to him simply observed with cold, expressionless eyes, fixed on the old Sorcerer as he spoke on.

“Can you hear? They say the Kerawegh hear something similar in the clatter of battle, the cries of War. If that is so, then I understand why they would seek it so strongly. But that is also why I can never follow blindly in their quest for where they see the purpose of each of us, I see the doom of us all. Each Dweghom’s heart may beat like a drum of war but the heart of the Hold is here, beats here, gives it life and strength and purpose. Here, youth Vodhergodh, here is the heart of the Hold! Here, where wild fire, unmoving earth, they meld, they change, they shape into something new, stronger, more powerful than what they were before.”

Almost aflame, with fire dancing in his eyes, his hair, his fingertips, contained solely by the grafts in his arms that glowed in latent power themselves, the Sorcerer finally turned and looked into the calm eyes of the Mnemancer.

“Know this: I will not change my mind. I will not repeat the mistake of the forefathers, blindly rushing into everything as we have always done. The Hold should not open its gates. If the Northern men dare to attack, they will be destroyed, yes. But if we open the Gates, we answer to their accusations of theft. If we answer to an accusation, then we acknowledge it. If we acknowledge it, then another Hold, whichever has lost one of their Dragon Blade, will come asking next. We have a Raegh and his existence offers an opportunity. I will not squander it so that Ishkish and his lot can have their fun. This is my memory, Apprentice Mnemancer. Record it.”

Calm, almost serene, the young Dweghom nodded.

“I, Vodhergodh, remember your Memory, Eonegdh” he said. “And be not challenged, for I never tried to change it”. He nodded under the flaming Dweghom’s frown.

“I will share another memory: It is remembered that three Clans are marching here. They are small, from Ghe’Domn, where their Memories are strange and many lesser clans exist within the Hold’s Clan, led by their Thanes. One such Dhaen, leads now three clans. He is called Alekhaneros but they call him Azdhaen. Flame Berserkers are his following above all else and he is looking for a lost Draegbhrud. That is the Memory I share and you forge yours as you will.”

The Sorcerer’s brows furrowed in a scowl as he turned to look at Vodhergodh.

“Deaghm dhorro” said the Mnemancer ignoring the reaction and, with a nod, departed.

The Hold of Orobduho: The Shattering saw most Elder Dragons destroyed, their deep investment and involvement in the Making of War's prison proving their undoing. But that in no way meant that all great threats were removed from the fight with the first blow. wGhisghigamosh, whose form glittered in all variations of his element of Water, was one of the greatest adversaries of the Dweghom during the First War. Its undoing proved its very power, as the Fire and Earth wielded combined by the Dweghom proved, in the end, fatal. Still, such was the might of the deed and the extent of sacrifice it required, that its fall birthed not one, but three Clans, one for each of the three Forefathers that led the fight. Enh, founder of His Clan, proved a master tactician, channeling the sorcerous ingenuity of Dhinsha, founder of Her Clan, and the undying zeal of Aghenidh, founder of His Clan, to Ghisghigamosh's destruction. Upon the melting corpse of their adversary, all three stood before the Mnemancers and all three were asked how they would lead their Clans. In the end, they were all deemed worthy to found a Hold on the corpse and Rook of their defeated foe, each to rule and lead according to their words.

Thus it came to be that once the First War was over, Enh was named Raegh of Orobdhuo, situated on today's further northern shores of the Russ lands, ever seeking the advice of an Ardent Kerawegh and a Tempered Sorcerer. To ensure the balance of power between the two castes, he decreed that while control of the Automata recovered from the Rook of Ghisghigamosh would be given to the Tempered, their use in battle would be decided by the Ardent. This, indeed, guaranteed that this devastating weapon would not be used in any… disputes within the Hold. Alas, however, Enh would not enjoy the prosperity of his own Hold, for he met his old companions once more.

During the harshest and most brutal times of the Memory Wars, Enh, Dhinsha and Aghenidh fought and killed each other, ordering their Clans to observe but not engage and live by the words spoken before the Mnemancers. *Clan before Creed* is what is written above the entrance of Orobdhuo and it is more than a motto, for the Dweghom dislike tall, empty words. Enh's words are the soul and identity of his Hold. Even the most fanatical of Ardent or the most resolute of the Tempered would not forget this.

The Memory of the Three could seem too… soft, almost peaceful a tale for Dweghom Clan founders but it is a testament to the influence of Memories on Dweghom lives. To this day, Orobdhuo abides to the Memory and Enh's words and among the variations of Dweghom society that exist in different Holds, Orobdhuo houses perhaps the most comprehensible to outsiders. It revolves around an almost unprecedented stability in the balances of power between its castes, with a Raegh ruling over Clan and Hold, while the Ardent and the Tempered advise, even as they struggle for influence.

From a Mnemancer's (or historian's) point of view, this stability is evident and clear but a Mnemancer would never confuse stability for peace. The tunnels and great halls of Orobdhuo have not seen less conflict, their stones have not been wetted by less Dweghom blood, than those of other Holds. From simple duels among rivals and skirmishes between their followings

to the castes expressing strongly their ideological disagreements dragging the entire Hold with them, Orobdhuo has known war un-ending since its founding.

If anything, the equal presence and influence of both Ardent and Tempered has ensured that their different points of view and philosophies are being represented on the field at all times. Neither has ever stopped vying for influence over the Raegh or the hearts and minds of Clansmen and the only way Dweghom hearts and minds are moved is through massive gains of Aghm. Interestingly, however, neither caste has ever actively tried to usurp the Raegh's power or undermine his authority, even as Raeghs have on more than one occassion been dethroned, with axe, hammer or fire. All parties involved have accepted this way of living: a Raegh must rule the Hold with both Ardent and Tempered advisors. This is not some abstract understanding or concept of social structure but rather the founding principle and core belief of the Hold itself.

This very principle was put at stake, for the Hold recently stood before an unprecedented precipice. On the shores far below the Hold, a bay among the fjord-like cliffs the Dweghom call "The Jaw of Ghisghigamosh", Nord longboats have laid anchor, with more boats arriving every now and then. Even as some voices were raised immediately that it would be "good practice" to throw their bodies back to the Deep Water, Raegh Adeildh, adopting the advice of the Tempered Sorcerer Eonegdh, ordered for the Northmen to be observed but nothing else, believing it the beginning of a raid on Tall Men lands. But as the longboats and their men stayed on the Jaw, the aggressive voices grew louder. That is the site of the Memory of Three, they said, and the Northmen's presence insult its Mnemantic Monument. While the Nords never attacked or defaced the Monument –and in fact seemed to treat it as if it were the entrance to the Hold itself – more ships have been arriving every month and a proper army had begun to form. Once a sizeable force had gathered, every day their leader started climbing before the gates of the Hold and yelled in their tongue. While few speak the tongue of Northmen, one word was understood: "Draegbhrud". According to the Mnemancers, the Northmen demanded that a stolen Dragonslaying weapon was returned to their rightful owners but they named those not.

With this insult spat from the lips of a Tall Man, any Tall Man, Raegh Adeildh sees his council of advisors divided more than ever. Voiced by the Kerawegh Ishkish, many in the Hold demand that the insult is answered, the Northmen slain and their Aghm, for all its worth, added to their slayers. Sorcerer Enoegdh, on the other hand, a powerful Magma wielder and leader of the Tempered caste under their elusive Steelshaper, refuses to agree. Should the Nords dare attack, Enoegdh advises, destroy them. But to respond to the insult is to acknowledge it while much like no Aghm is to be gained from killing a simpleton, less Aghm would be gained from killing an imbecile like the Northman leader.

While Ishkish and his Ardent froth at this, Enoegdh's control of the Automata and the Raegh's decision that the Hold will only March if they all agree, the situation remains as is, even as more Nord ships reach the Jaw. The stalemate however is sure to be broken soon, for another Memory was revealed by the Raegh's Mnemancer:

"*It is remembered that three Clans are marching here. They are small, from the Hold of Ghe'Domn, where their Memories are strange and many lesser clans exist within the Hold's Clan, led by their Thanes. One such Dhaen now leads three clans here. He is called Alekhaneros but they call him Azdhaen. Flame Berserkers are his following above all else and he is looking for a lost Draegbhrud.*"

The Mysteries of Ognisros: "*Here we hold domain, on the corpse of Ghiazdraghish, Last of the Stone Old Ones, may our rage ever flow on his dead heart. We, having ruined the Oppressors, having shattered the River-Stone, having destroyed the Chained, we live here in Endless Freedom. From this Memory we start remembering: since we found freedom.*"

Touched gently by the faint glow of the pool of lava below, these are the words inscribed over the entrance of the Hold of Ognisros, as they were translated by Hyth of Lantony. It is a fitting light to a Hold aptly named as "Flowing Fire", for Fire indeed was what gave birth to the Hold, in fire was it baptized and in fire does its entire existence depend upon.

Dug deep into a gaping crevice on the volcanic peak of Lugh's Seat overshadowing Glencove, Ognisros had managed to stay hidden from humanity's eyes until only a little over a century ago. The mountain had ever dominated local myths and superstitions, fueled by the tales of Myrddin of Many Names, a legendary druid. It was he that had cautioned against climbing the volcanic peak, naming it as the domain of the Crafter god. With time, these warnings would be incorporated into local mythology until they turned to simple cautionary tales but the disappearance of a handful of exploration expeditions would ensure the mountain would remain effectively undisturbed and entirely unsettled for centuries.

On the eve of the fourth century a folkloric scholar named Ergast of Aust would revisit the tales of Myrddin and propose that the druid was, in fact, referring to a Hold of crafters rather than the domain of the Crafter. Even though his proposal aimed at supporting his theory that Myrddin was in direct contact with the Weavers, for such is what the Weavers called the Dweghom, his publication fueled the interest of Dweghom researchers in scholarly circles. Decades later, Hyth of Lantony, a young enthusiastic and daring initiate at the time, would become the first to locate Ognisros.

According to his notes, the Founding Memory of Ognisros recounts the deeds of Bheodorash, Maker of his Clan, First Raegh of the Hold and Slayer of Ghiazdraghish. Bheodorash is remembered as a ruthlessly effective strategist. While the hated foe remained pinned on the ground by the sacrifice of many, he did not hesitate to order the opening of a chasm so deep that would drown the dragon in the fires below… leading half of his own men to their deaths along with their enemy, responding to his officers' protests with a simple "They will die fre". For those knowledgeable in Dweghom mentality, it is perhaps no surprise that he is remembered to be able to hear the song of battle and feel its flow, akin to what the Ardent Kerawegh experience after they have performed their Dheukorro. Indeed, Ognisros remembers proudly on its walls that its founder once stood in the presence of War… and advocated its embrace and

subsumption. Knowing this, an error in Hyth's translation above is brought to light, as it is repeated below:

"Here lies Bheodorash Maker of his Clan, First King of the Hold, Slayer of Ghiazdraghish. He saw freedom in chains. He saw freedom bound. He absorbed freedom and broke the chains."

It is an understandable error and in many ways fitting, for it captures the essence of Bheodorash's philosophy. Hyth translated War as Freedom and indeed, Bheodorash's Memories propose that if existence is a struggle, then War is the manifestation of freedom and to wage it is to live free.

The ways of the Ardent have ever dominated life in Ognisros, forcing all castes into their constant conflicts. The words of the Kerawegh echo the loudest in its halls, fueling struggles and allowing only such intervals between campaigns such as necessary to maintain the population on levels that ensure the survival of the Hold. Even the Tempered have, if not embraced, then adapted to this status quo, readily jumping into battle against the other castes, even as they see their own Hold and lives as the perfect example of why temperance is needed for the Dweghom to escape their bonds to War.

While Hyth found plenty of evidence of their violent disposition in the inscriptions, he understandably assumed that those belonged to bygone eras and unknown foes. Throughout his notes he never paints a picture of an active and violent Hold. Even though he spent days descending and studying the Mnemantic inscriptions on the walls of the corridors, his notes concentrate on the discoveries he made, when they are not marveling at the ingenious and awe-inspiring construction of the Hold itself. He goes on for pages upon pages detailing mechanisms and materials capable of channeling the lava to everyday use, from as simple as lightning to forges and even the opening, and sealing, of giant doorways. Never, during those notes, does he describe the sound of battles or warcries and death wails echoing from the deep, never does he seemed threatened or fearful there. It is highly possible that his visit happened during a ceasefire, one of those reluctant breaks that ensure the continuation of the Hold's very existence, as the population is allowed to flourish for a while. It is also possible that at last Ognisros stands united under one Raegh… or one Kerawegh. This latest prospect gains perhaps more merit by the final entry on his diary, which was confiscated after his incarceration in Lantony's monastery for the insane. The entry reads a simple sentence:

They are coming.

On the Location and Hospitality of Dweghom Holds: Humans have long speculated on the reason why most Dweghom Holds seem to be cloistered upon mountain sides, more often than not on inhospitable, rough terrains, with precious few natural passages going anywhere near them. A common theory suggests that the old age when they were built offered entirely different landscapes and that the disappearance of the civilization that birthed them explains the lack of passages and trails. Others, more learned perhaps or who simply happen near more active Holds, claim that the locations were chosen exactly because for their unapproachable

landscapes, be it because they reflected the reclusive and even savage nature of their denizens or as natural defenses against mighty enemies long gone. Human curiosity to answer such questions, however, seems to have been mostly trampled in the case of Dweghom Holds. Since the Fall, humanity has avoided settling near or exploring Holds, bar cases when scholarly interest or simple, old-fashioned greed and treasure hunting prevailed. In those cases, those that returned only fueled the talk of a long dead civilization, speaking of sealed tombs waiting in darkness.

Daring scholars who have managed to study at least partially the Mnemantic depictions on Hold entrances have discovered that there is some truth in such speculations. The Dweghom have indeed long withdrawn from the world, leaving their gates and their surroundings mostly unattended and indeed each location was connected with a battle against an ancient and powerful enemy. Still, while each of these scholars is offered a glimpse of the truth, such individuals are few and far between, scattered throughout the world without a chance to compare notes and theories. Had they such a chance, perhaps they would have discovered a near universal truth about Dweghom Holds: they are built on graveyards.

Be it on the site of an emptied Dragon Rook, an ancient battlefield or, in some cases, the petrified husks of their defeated foes, all Holds are more than cities and houses for their Dweghom. They are monuments to the Clan's birth upon victory against their hated former masters and their ilk. While it would be an exaggeration to say that under every rock and nook around a Hold's entrance lie the remains of Dragons, Dweghom and Crafters alike, it would not be a gross one, for such is possibly the case for many Holds. Yet the sharp rocks and deep crevices around Gholond are not explained by fossilized dragon bones (at least not all of them), as some grim romantics could hope and the rivers of lava flowing through Ognisros are not the blood of an Elder of Fire that was felled there. The rough landscapes owe their formation elsewhere; they are testaments to the vast sums of pure, primordial elemental force employed and released, both by the Dweghom themselves and upon the deaths of powerful dragons, which have twisted and morphed the land and have seeped into it, dominating since. Such a primordial influence could also explain why only some humans have ever been drawn to Holds but rarely settled near them if it could be avoided. If the landscape is not uninspiring enough, the sense of dread and death, even millennia after the fact, has surely proven to be so.

Still, some explorers, be they brave, fool or both, have dared approach and even enter Holds that either were or looked abandoned, for it must be said that there are more sealed Holds than those active, even if not many. Of them, only the heartiest have kept walking, braving the darkness beyond; for if Hold entrances are metaphorical graveyards on the outside, these daring and foolhardy souls soon realize that they are literal ones once their gates are crossed. While many never returned, some did, at times bringing back treasures from the abandoned Holds, all however described the eerie atmosphere, resulting to endless ridiculous tales of haunted treasures. In 652 P.R., a Russ scholar by the name of Alexei Drashinov exploring the

gates of Orobdhuo, accurately captured the feelings that walking into a Hold invoked. In his notes he wrote:

"Even the heavy curtain of light from the gates and its openings seemed hesitant to disturb the darkness and silence beyond. The silence! So much worse than the darkness, it was. If my torch's light seemed to dance shy and afraid in darkness so deep, then every noise I made seemed an insult; an affront to the silence that reigned, immediately answered as angered whispers, in echoes that returned distorted and threatening. It was not long before I came to know who they had disturbed. After the large cavern beyond the gates, I found tunnels, wide enough for three or four carriages to cross and so tall that my torch's light barely licked the ceiling.

Steeped in darkness that got denser with every step, above doors barred by heavy chains held in place not by locks but by seals of melted metal alloys unknown to me, rows of stone faces glimmered in the torchlight, greeting me with grim expressions over entrances to what could only be tombs. I was so startled when I saw the first face that I yelled and my own scream came back to mock me in cackling echoes, as if the sealed dead snickered at my fear."

Alas, Drashinov's warnings never reached a large audience, neither was he credited for the various discoveries he made on his days-long exploration. Mnemancer Vodhergodh, however, to whom the belongings of the slaughtered intruding scholar were delivered, found his notes enlightening and the incident of his startled yell indeed amusing.

Character Portrait, Alekhaneros: *"We each wage petty little wars around ourselves, without meaning. We turned the very weapon of our freedom into the shackles of our kind, fearing our own blessings, our own strength and putting numbers and measures in our very freedom."*

Alekhaneros was born in the Dheubrodsûn clan of Ghe'Domn, where many lesser clans led by Thanes are housed, all of them under the rule of the Hold's Raegh. In theory, this arrangement could provide prosperity and to an extent it has but in earnest it mostly serves as fertile ground for conflict and opportunities to gain Aghm, with entire clans ever wrestling to prove their superiority over the others. As a cadet, Alekhaneros showed immense promise from a very young age, his mentality, however, branded him as an oddity and never allowed him to excel. He showed interest in the weirdest things, like the Tall Men and the surface but, worse, he objected to many of the traditions and practices of his people. Because of this, he grew up repeatedly challenging and being challenged by his seniors and superiors, only to be put down for his insolence. On one hand, this allowed him to hone his skills, constantly battling stronger opponents than him, on the other, however, he lost valuable Aghm time and again. This forced him to a position of mediocrity despite his prowess, serving his own same-blood and closest friend, Gheshvirbrod, as a mere member of his following. For a long time he accepted this fate solemnly, even if never with satisfaction.

True change in his life came during yet another battle between clans, when, refusing to let Gheshvirbrod along with two bands of their clan's warriors die, he fled before combat in order to bring reinforcements. He accepted the loss in both Aghm and respect his decision brought

him, for he believed that the “obsession” with Aghm restricted the worth and power of the entire Clan and Hold, for the wider picture and strength of the clan were being sacrificed in the altar of individual worth. What he never accepted was the dismissal from Gheshvirbrod’s following. He left the Living Halls, descending to the depths below the Hold, in a self-imposed exile in order to prove that worth can be found beyond the ways of clan and Hold. Many argue that he did so beyond anyone’s imagination but many more underline the irony of his method, for what he did was very much to undertake the Ardent Dheukorro.

True enough, Alekhaneros returned as a prime example of an exceptional Kerawegh. If his following of Flame Berserkers and his own accounts of “hearing” the war above and even the world itself spinning were not proof enough, then the influence he effortlessly exerted and the inspiration he offered upon his return that saw him gain control of his clan and inspiring more to follow, surely serve as evidence. In the Living Halls, he spoke of a War beyond Clans or castes, a War that Eä herself was waging, a War from which the Dweghom would be absent, should their ways not change. Advocating that old feuds are but new shackles that must be broken and that new goals must be forged, he has accepted Sorcerers and other Tempered as advisors causing even the Ardent of Ghe’Domn to not follow him in unison. Despite his many enemies, with his Flame Berserkers at his side, he quickly claimed Clan Dheubrodsûn, soon after calling all clans to follow him to the surface united. Ironically, or perhaps in true Dweghom fashion, his very words caused the entire Hold to erupt in unprecedented violence but Alekhaneros dismissed these conflicts as petty squabbles without true purpose or meaning. Named Azdhaen, the Fire Thane, for his Flame Berserker followers by those who rallied to him, he led three of Ghe’Domn’s lesser clans to the surface, with Orobdhuo as his destination, where Nord forces have landed outside its gates, declaring they are there to reclaim a stolen Dragonblade.

While the true motivations of the Fire Thane remain unknown, he seems set on reviving the Dweghom as a force that affects the entire world. When it comes to the other races, he has perhaps achieved this to an extent already. Knowing mystery and suspense to be powerful agents in capturing the imagination of the Tall Men, he moved his troops as stealthily as possible, removing any chance witnesses he encountered along the way. Instead, as an announcement of his presence to the world -and as a “warm up” for his troops as he claimed- he destroyed the forces of Nepenthe and some of Riismark, entirely removing the town of Vatsdam from the map in the process, while making sure enough evidence of Dweghom involvement was left behind to be found. While it would not be long until rumors of the Dweghom being on the surface again would spread fear among humans and Exiles alike, the wisdom of this attention is doubtful, as he roams lands that offer no allies or shelter.

When it comes to the other Dweghom, however, his actions may have well earned him more enemies than admirers. The Tempered of Ghe’Domn were only empowered by his antics and his Hold’s Raegh is furious with his deeds. Many Ardent could very well want this antagonist removed as well, while one can only guess what the Mnemancers truly think and do under the façade of passive observation of this breaker of tradition or how any other Hold will react to the

knowledge of clans walking the surface again. Perhaps more tragically, however, it is in no way a certainty that he himself has escaped the shackles of tradition he claims to have broken. Already he has caused the kind of division which he denounces and Alekhaneros may very well be walking a path all too familiar to the Dweghom. For in his heart the Fire Thane knows that to win the hearts of all Dweghom, he must win their respect. And in the entire history of his people, there has only been one enemy the Dweghom deemed truly worthy…

Character Portrait, Raegh Theurodhin of Ghleulgas: There are many Memories carved in the Halls of Ghleulgas.

Their Hold is considered one of the oldest and best constructions of their people. Its founding Memory involves the death of not one, but two of the strongest Dragons to have fallen after the Shattering. A score of armies, Life-Binders, Body-Twisters, humans and even a host of Dweghom, have been destroyed throughout history before the Hold's walls. More Drakes than in any other Hold have been broken and tamed, utterly and completely, to serve at the whim of their masters. And, as if all this was not enough, a Living Enemy of Earth lies imprisoned there still, chained and bound in all ways possible, one eye hooked open for eternity to witness its progeny stumble pathetically like beasts of burden, dim and dull before the might and glory of its former slaves.

Still, despite all those Memories, the Dweghom of Ghleulgas are even prouder of their Raegh.

He is called many things; Old Mountain, for he has been Raegh for over a millennium, unmoving from his throne and unchallenged but by those who are now dead; Aghmehn, the One of Aghm, as if he was sculpted by pure worth or as if his Aghm defined the very concept; Mhûlvhest he is also called, the Maulfisted, undefeated in brawl, the Memories say, since he was just a Thane, but for another reason too. But, if anyone ever asked the Dweghom of Ghleulgas who their Raegh is, there is only one answer, one name: Theurodhin. He is the blood of Theurdraghd the Wielder of Dragons' Death, and while blood is said to matter not, all Remember this for their Raegh for only against his ancestor who fell two Dragons could Theurodhin's Aghm be compared to.

What millennia of captivity never achieved, he did. What endless abuse and even torture failed to do, he managed. What a history of ridicule, derision and insults never produced, he delivered to his people. For despite its condition, the Enemy never surrendered, never gave up, never yielded. Its body may have been captured but its spirit, petty and hateful as it is, never broke. Until, that is, the Raegh spoke to it. Until he punched it. Until Theurodhin made the Dragon shed a tear.

Even without this one, greatest of Memories, Theurodhin would be a Raegh worthy of his crown. It is Remembered that as a youth, centuries before the fall, he left the Hold. He returned with no Aghm, no name, no rights and only a maul of simple stone. Since then, he has ever gained Aghm and lost only once. Many tried to best him, in brawls, in combat and in wit, but

failed. Many tried to take the crown from him, as is the Dweghom way but none has come close to achieving it.

Now, the Old Mountain sits on his throne, solemn, silent, unmoving, gray hair and beard crowning a face scarred by countless combats and dark eyes falling on his council as they take their places before him. The elders of the Ardent and the Tempered throw challenges at each other, supported by those in the Clan who favor one or the other. It is a scene he has witnessed countless times before, a scene he will no doubt witness again. He knows where it will lead; if not during this Council, then the Council after or the Council after that. Still, he moves not; not even when two Thanes brawl before him, ready to prove their Aghm and win his approval in their choice of spouse. He Remembers a similar battle of his youth; he Remembers them all. He sees who will win and he approves. He is more worthy. So he nods when the combat is over and acknowledges the victor and that is the most he moves even as the challenges around him resume.

Thanes, Dragonslayers, Sorcerers and Kerawegh now scream at each other. He listens absentmindedly to them, eyes turned to the Dragon; its eye hooked open, forced to see the strength of any and all in the Raegh's council, their readiness, their will, their Aghm. But the Dragon looks not at them but back at him, a stare of will between two old foes. Insults are now spat between the members of his council, openly, defiantly, as the King remains unmoving and his inaction is considered an approval. Hands reach for weapons, as a threat at first, as a statement immediately after. His lie next to him untouched and unsought for: the simplest of stone mauls and the best of axes, the Draegbhrud of his ancestor. It will be in this Council after all. Battle will be joined, the Halls will be painted crimson. Only the worthy will prevail, strengthened in mind and body and the Hold will be the better for it, as is the Dweghom way, as has been done since the First War. And the Dragon will lie there, its eye open, forced to see its enemies stronger. One of the youngest in the council screams "Moaghm Dorh", the two words that drive all Dweghom. Others follow.

"Enough" he says. It is a hoarse whisper almost but it is heard. Silence falls. All movement stops.

"I know where a Dragon hides" he adds. "Prepare the Clan. The Hold will March." He gets up, as shocked silence gives way to yells and cheers.

No End to Their Memories: Human historians often forget the world-shaking events that took place during the last century before the Fall. Absorbed by the half-forgotten truths of their own kind's misfortunes as they fled the Old Dominion, few historians turn their attention to what the elder races were doing at the time or even what was truly transpiring in the collapsing Dominion itself. Had they done so, perhaps the Dweghom would know of what had happened to their own kin that was caught in the devastation of the Fall.

While Capitas and the Dominion in general were being torn apart from within, the Dweghom were engaged en masse in the Exile Campaign, an open war against Exiles of all cultures and creeds. While the Campaign was reportedly global, according to overseas human merchants and

ambassadors, the most significant events happened in the lands of the Dominion, in a convergence of chaos and destruction that left no one in the area unaffected. Remnant Weaver enclaves were either annihilated or their populations fled, the most powerful human civilization of the time was destroyed, an entire Pantheon was torn down from the heavens, the W'adrhŭn claimed their freedom and, for the first time since their war with the Dragons, at least five known Spires were destroyed, either partially or completely. As for the Dweghom? Their Campaign was the cause of much of this mayhem, but their so-called victories did not come without a price: at least three Hosts and their clans disappeared entirely from the continent of Surtoris: Clan Oengudsun of Hegh'Domn, Clan Kankhalis of Ghabol'Domn and Clan Arnsun of Ua'Domn.

This number and these names are largely incomplete. The fate of Clan Bhidhbisn of Ghi'ia'Domn is also not fully Remembered; the largest part of its population is also considered lost to the Fall but a remnant force had been sent to the West to chase the fleeing Weavers. They, in turn, met with the force sent west by the Steelmancer Ishdi of Clan Afgharsun of Enduer, whose fate is also unknown but who did not perish during the Fall. The two remnant forces, however, united, would come to reclaim Ghor'Domn, thus keeping their clans' Memories alive. In reality, however, both Bhidhbisn and Agharsun are practically lost; the first was most likely caught by the destruction of the Fall. The latter's fate is even more shameful: having helped the humans against their battle with their dead warriors, Steelmancer Ishdi and her remaining clan members simply… disappeared. Technically, however, for the Dweghom these two clans survive, even if diluted and diminished and thus are not part of the aforementioned three, who are part of the Memory of Loss.

For the Dweghom, evidence and logic are not the same as Memories. No Mnemancer has recorded the events of those Clans' endings, none living Remember what happened to them. This is not something new or unique to the three clans. Many times do individuals, often those that undertake the Dheukhorro, get lost with their ends and the end of their Memories unrecorded and unwitnessed. Even if the term has come to refer mostly the disappearance of the three Clans during the fall, this is what the Memory of Loss means: Remembering those whose Memories have no end. Ask any Dweghom and, indeed, for all intents and purposes, those three clans are dead, claimed by the Fall. But that conclusion is not enough. How much Aghm had each clan claimed before it perished – IF it perished – or what deeds were accomplished before death claimed them – IF death claimed them? Uncertainty is not tolerated when a Memory is preserved and thus, for the Memory of Loss, those clans – and those individuals – still linger, for there is no End to their Memory.

The Memory of Loss is a sad destiny for any Dweghom. In many ways, that fate is worse than being Forgotten, for indeed they are being Remembered, sorrowful ghosts that linger but do not truly exist; their names, when uttered, are always followed by "May Loss Forget them and their Memory end." So, when three entire clans joined the ranks of Loss' Memory, the very term came to mean their sad fate, a weight all Dweghom carry.

There is a bright side to this for the rest of the world; a silver lining that possibly keeps the peace and holds back the tides of another Dweghom Campaign: if the end of the three Clans is not Remembered, there is no Memory of who is to blame for their loss. Would the Exiles be blamed, as this happened during a Campaign against them? Would the Old Dominion be held responsible, for it was their amateurish worship of minor Primordials that led to this destruction and even in death their worship continues? If so, is there really a difference between dead humans and their living descendants? Woe to the fool that uncovers such truths. There is no telling what Ending the Dweghom will offer to *their* memories.

Adhya, Ruin of Strangers: *"In this Hold we Remember. We remember every slight, every offense, every injury. We remember the old Enemy and we remember the new, the ones who offered the tools for the crimes committed. We remember those who would call them gods or friends. Cohorts to Dragons, parasites of the world, insults to worthy existence, we remember and we say; bring War to all Strangers."*

This is the only discernible Memory above the gates, high on the slopes of the mountain range that marks the start of the Weaver Courts, where lies Ghor'Domn, the Domain of Strangers. It is an insult of a name for all Dweghom but it is a name that all Dweghom remember.

If the Halls of Ghor'Domn once remembered the time and events that gave it this name, the Mnemantic inscriptions of these Memories have long been defaced. Gone are as well the treasures of the dragon rook that stood in its place before it and gone are even the bodies of the Ancestors which were sealed in their houses. Still, the Dweghom remember its name, even as they prefer to call it Bebdhose, the One Which Fell. All but those who live in it and have paid in blood for the right to do so. Adhya, their Raegh, has seen to this. She has taught her people that the name must be kept, worn as a badge of honor and a fire to fuel their unending war against all Exiles.

Whether it originally fell to the Weavers or the Spires it remains unknown but when the Dweghom came to reclaim it, the Spires held it. Adhya was a Thane then, one of the twenty four that led the March from the Holds of the East, with the permission of three different Raeghs from three different Holds. Their missive was simple: reclaim Bebdhose.

The March had come prepared for a siege to last years, if not decades. It lasted three days. On the first day, the Dweghom began the construction of a walled encampment and watchtowers, to ensure that reinforcements from the Spire of the Towering Man in the South would not flank them during an assault. On the second day, plans for tunnels to infiltrate the Halls were drawn, as the Dweghom knew firsthand how easy it was to defend a Hold's Gates. Before the dawn of the third day, Adhya and her following gained control of the gate in a surprise assault, hanging the head of the Abomination she had bested to signal for their comrades to attack en masse. It took more time for the Hold to be cleared entirely than Adhya needed to plan and execute the attack that reclaimed the Hold.

Many claim that the Siege was but the first battle of a war that has not ended since. They are correct. Adhya's passionate hatred towards the Exiles was not quenched by the reclamation of the Hold. Named Raegh for her victory, she has led Ghor'Domn to one assault after the other, against the Spires, against the Weavers and against any human that ever dared to try and settle in the slopes of the mountain-range. What respite Adhya's enemies have found for over six centuries is only due to the internal struggles of her Hold but, overall, her people have enjoyed unprecedented unity in their efforts, united under a single banner and against multiple common foes.

Some speculate that this is her goal: to provide a constant, common enemy and keep her Hold from suffering the same fate as most others, avoiding the curse of all Dweghom. But Adhya would be the first to admit that this so-called curse neither troubles nor concerns her; for her, there is no such thing. The enemies of the Dweghom are clear in her mind; the Dragons, of course, should any of them still living dares to resurface. The Spires who provided the tools for the sins of the Dragons. The Weavers who conspired with them. The humans, those wretched remnants of a decadent Dominion, who mirrored the Dragon depravities and who now, rumors claim, cohort with the Spires. Even the Nords who worshiped those foul parasites and accepted their "gifts" as divine blessings.

The enemies of the Dweghom are all who have slighted them. And Adhya remembers them all.

The Living World of Raegh Theurodhin of Ghleulgas: (This is a summary of Theurodhin's story during the first part of the Living World storyline.
You can see the expanded version by visiting the Living World and browsing through past choices, at the bottom of the character's banner. You can also see Theurodhin's Portrait here.)

In the Hold of Ghleulgas, a dragon was kept living still: there, chained but sustained since the first Memory of the Hold, the Enemy remained defiant and unyielding in spirit. Until him.

He was called many things; Old Mountain, for he had been Raegh for over a millennium, unmoving from his throne and unchallenged but by those who are now dead; Aghmehn, the One of Aghm, as if he was sculpted by pure worth or as if his Aghm defined the very concept; Mhûlvhest he was also called, the Maulfisted, undefeated in brawl, the Memories said, since he was just a Thane, but for another reason too. But, if anyone ever asked the Dweghom of Ghleulgas who their Raegh was, there was only one answer, one name: Theurodhin. He was the blood of Theurdraghd the Wielder of Dragons' Death, and while blood is said to matter not, all Remembered this for only against his ancestor who fell two Dragons could Theurodhin's Aghm be compared to.

Under the forced gaze of the imprisoned Enemy, Raegh Theurodhin announced to his Hold that he knew the location of a dragon survivor, hiding for millennia. Silencing the cheers of his people with a gesture, he ordered for preparations to be made for the Host to march. Even he, the Old Mountain, could not help but share their enthusiasm for a moment, even as he ever glanced thoughtfully at the Enemy.

With preparations under way, he was expected to name an Exemplar, a champion of the Host and its Raegh. Ignoring both candidates presented by the castes of the Tempered and the Ardent, Theurodhin instead chose Fhedhis, a promising Clan member. Taken by rage for this insult, the Tempered candidate, Dhosberrin, challenged the Raegh only to fall dead moments later.

While it was the Tempered that suffered the loss, both castes presented a united front later, challenging the Raegh and pressing for answers about the location of the Dragon. His thoughts betraying a distrust towards the Mnemancers, Theurodhin in the end decided against misleading his people with a lie and instead revealed that the Dragon lies to the North, in Mannheim.

With preparations ongoing, a new problem rose, as the Mnemancers dictated that the Enemy could not be abandoned, for the Clan's very birth depended on his capture. In an

effort to somewhat appease the castes, the Raegh decided to force them to cooperate and find a solution to this matter. Their staggering solution seemed impossible: they planned to move the entire mountain.

With this impossible task before them, the castes begun cooperating and to ensure their unity and recognition, Theurodhin decided that their leaders' names should be first mentioned on the moving Mountain's Memory. He was challenged by his Mnemancers who performed as he asked but ensured to record that it was done on his orders. To this challenge, he answered by breaking one of the most sacred traditions of the Dweghom: in order to gather the Living Hold in as close a part of the mountain as possible, he ordered for the ancestral sealed halls to be reopened, so that the living population could be gathered near the surface. Soon, the Raegh's challenge came second to the insult they discovered, as some sealed halls were found desecrated and looted by humans.

As cries for vengeance echo from the Clansmen around the Halls, the castes caution that the work must take precedence. Observed silently by the Mnemancers, Theurodhin chose to side with the castes; both to regain some favor with them but for his own reasons as well. His decision reminds him yet again just how lonely his reign has been; save for his maul and the ever-watchful eye of the imprisoned Enemy, Theurodhin feels the pressure of years and solitude both. In a moment of weakness, or clarity, he turns to his Exemplar, Fhedhis, and chooses to take mold him into a worthy successor one day.

During an almost heartfelt discussion, the Raegh tries to impart to the younger Exemplar the reasoning behind his decision; just one's Aghm does not benefit one's descendants, to fight the humans of today for what their ancestors did would be meaningless. A Raegh, he claims, must rule with purpose, not be pushed by the currents. He then challenged Fhedhis to oversee the most menial task he could think of for two Rosters, hoping the Exemplar would find a way to temper his urges but also learn to channel even the most menial tasks into service towards his purpose.

With his new protégé dismissed, he turned to military matters and visited one of his best officers, Udhgus. Rattled by the cryptic lack of cooperation offered by the castes, the officer underlines the rising tension between the Clan and the castes but also the immense logistical issues of safeguarding the moving mountain and the prison both, while on the move. Cornered and left with few choices considering the Enemy awaiting at the end of their journey, the Raegh decided to exercise his right: naming the moving mountain a Host unlike any other, he orders all to gather immediately.

Soon after, he stood alone, before the eye of the imprisoned Dragon, just as he had done in the beginning of his reign. Dry and plagued by insects and parasites, the eye starred at him without without anger or fear. Then, calling for the mountain to move, the Raegh hit the dragon in the eye, its pain fueling the magic that the castes had prepared.

As the Raegh begun his descent, he ignored the broken crust of puss and blood that allowed the eye to tear once more, offering the first relief to the Enemy since Theurodhin's first visit there. Just as he ignored the dragon's words in his mind, thanking him for this second act of kindness.

And the entire Hold moved. Aigbregh Ghleulgas, the moving mountain, was unleashed upon the world.

Is the Dheukorro a Dead End?: Elena,

I have long been vexed by the notion of what Ankalimus writes in his Descentia's prelude:

Down deep, we must go,
Down deep where the brother broke.
Down deep, we must go,
Down and down again, under the darkest cloak.

There they lie, infinite worlds untold,
Under the soil, under the earth, under a Dweghom Hold
There they lie, corridors without end
There mind, soul and matter, there they all bend.

Now, since I have no doubt that you have in fact come closer to putting your hands in open flames than you have to opening the Descentia, allow me to explain.

When not rhyming badly, Ankalimus was considered THE authority on all matters Dweghom. In fact, his Descentia is the holy book of all scholars who, for whatever reason, seem infatuated by those destructive short savages. Even today, our breath-afflicted descendants in the West would likely accept the Lord's embrace where I to offer them a mere peek of the cover of my surviving copy.

Following me so far? Good.

Now, this six hundred and forty-two-page treatise on the sons of War, as he calls them, is indeed filled to the brim with information about them. I say information, however I suspect a large amount is theories as, apart from his – admittedly remarkable – work on their language and rune system, he admits he presents what he has extrapolated from scattered conversations with members of their species, which I suspect must have amounted to a grand total of a quarter-watch at best. Still, all things considered, Ankalimus has done a thorough job of gathering materials from other writers, from the amassed knowledge of the Collegia and, being a Magos himself, even from the Magi's apocrypha. His findings are indeed limited but insightful and they span anything from history and modern social structure, to philosophical debates, their incomprehensible social standing system, nutritious needs and habits etc. To the language he dedicates, without exaggeration, half his book. To the rest he dedicates 49.9%.

But then there's that 0.1.

Dedicating no more than a few paragraphs, Ankalimus speaks of a tradition one caste's members undertake ritualistically, although none is barred from performing it either. It is called the Dheukorro, which he translates to "Descent," and during it, the Dweghom simulate the path their ancestors took before the Breaking. "Surely," Ankalimus writes and I quote, "this is an appropriate and adorable little tradition that befits their mythology." He explains not what mythology he refers to, nor does he mention this tradition elsewhere in his book.

But then he names it Descentia. And, rather unfittingly, has a poem in his prelude urging that "down, down we must go." Prelude and title best reflect the subject of a few paragraphs in a six hundred and forty-two pages.

Why?

I can think of two possible reasons as to why. One has to do with the very tangible disdain our Lord holds for the Dweghom. While scientific analysis was ever encouraged in His Dominion, I think we can admit that there were some restrictions in the past. Second is that Ankalimus was a Magos. Seeking knowledge beyond our Lord's tolerance was what those blasphemous bastards lived for, wasn't it? That and flaunting knowledge they possessed but did not share – especially with their peers. What better way for Ankalimus to tell his entire blasphemous community that he knew something he both wasn't supposed to and which they didn't, than putting in in plain sight as well?

Much as I admire the man's playful nature in this matter, I, of course, condemn his practice and his hybris in seeking knowledge beyond what the Lord allowed at the time. Today, however, it is His Will that we know all, we reach all.

If there are corridors without end, I want to traverse them and, with the Lord's gift, I have an eternity to put their description to the test. More importantly however, if there are infinite worlds untold, I want to bring the Lord's Gift to them.

Now wouldn't that humble our "First among equals?"

What say you?

F.

The Rise of Ragodosh, The Stone Face King: Before there was the Stone Face King – the unyielding and granite-willed Raegh of Ghe'Domn – there was only Ragodosh of clan Gwerhygsûn. Ragodosh's rise to power begun as any good tale should: ignited within the crucible of glorious combat and subsequently tempered by the bloody detritus of greater battles. Ghe'Domn – a hold known for housing multiple clans under the same roof – did not always have the luxury of being ruled by a worthy leader: to reach the position of Raegh within a Dweghom hold, one must first gather the appropriate Aghm, and there were pockets of time within Ghe'Domn's lengthy history where such individuals were nowhere to be found. Ragodosh's rise to prominence began amidst such leaderless and unstable times, with the hold of Ghe'Domn having no Raegh to steer its denizens and tensions between clans being at an all-time high as a result.

To settle tensions and arguments between clans, the many Dhaens, the clan heads of Ghe'Domn's unusually numerous clans, had agreed to a grand gladiatorial bout. Within the Hold's central throne room, which lingered without a living occupant and housed the ruins of Ghe'Domn's first Raegh and founder, Anaghallosh, each clan's warriors fought to settle disputes in their clan's name. For clan Gwerhygsûn, Ragodosh was deemed worthy to fight as one of its champions: the young, at the time, warrior was known for his incredible physical fortitude and battle resilience, making a notable addition among the gathered warriors – but not the favorite. Early through the event, Ragodosh bested his opponents through his methodical and reserved fighting style, never overextending or succumbing to gladiatorial theatrics and wearing down his enemies bit-by-bit – softening them up before he could deliver the final blow.

Unlike the other duelists that fought in this multi-tiered bout, Ragodosh never boasted or showed his bloodlust to the gathered crowd; in fact, the champion of clan Gwerhygsûn rarely made a sound when he fought, something that caused many observers to remark this as strange. When others were toiling and grunting amidst the heat of single gladiatorial combat, Ragodosh appear near statuesque in his lethality and fighting style; his features showed no strain or outlining emotions, being mostly emotionless and unmoving. Whispers circulated that this warrior of clan Gwerhygsûn had, in fact, a stone face – a characteristic, speculated by some, that led to the creation of his infamous title many years later.

On the third day of the event, Ragodosh was among those that were still able to fight and was set to fight a champion of clan Temhoksûn next – Belmortan. Belmortan, by all accounts, was a warrior of immense strength and skill, having overpowered all of his opponents and being the favorite to win the great combat event within Ghe'Domn. The bloodthirsty warrior had been a clear crown favorite during the dules, going as far as to kill some of his opponents – even when he was the clear victor and they were on the verge of collapse. In the eyes of everyone,

Ragodosh – the strange and silent warrior from clan Gwerhygsûn – was about to meet his end at the hands of a terrifying foe.

The duel began as expected: Belmortan used his mighty war-pick to overwhelm his opponent, unleashing a flurry of lighting fast blows that were meant to overwhelm his opponent. Ragodosh was defensive at the beginning, using his shield and armored body to absorb most of the punishment that was unleashed towards him. Bones were cracked and flesh was ruptured and bruised, but Ragodosh remained standing regardless. Eventually, Belmortan became sluggish and tired, feeling his muscles become heavier with each blow; it was then that Ragodosh found his opening, smashing his axe's shaft behind the enemy's skull with one well-aimed blow that sent the feared Belmortan to collapse like a powerless automaton. Picking Belmortan's bloodied war-pick, Ragodosh raised it over his defeated foe but merely planted it next to his head instead of granting Belmortan the same mercy that he had shown to his enemies. Turning to the Mnemancers, a panting Ragodosh waited patiently for their nods to confirm his victory – but his defeated foe had other plans. As Ragodosh walked to the center of the arena to be declared victor, Belmortan, dizzy, stumbling and desperate, picked his war-pick and rushed to strike from behind. Exhausted in his own right, Ragodosh had little strength and no weapon to defend himself – but his clansmen did and a sword flew from the balconis to be planted in Belmortan's chest. Then, all hell broke loose. Two of Belmortan's kin jumped from the arena's balconies, screaming that clan Gwerhygsûn had cheated and rushing to kill Ragodosh – and Gwerhygsûn responded in kind.

From that point on, things escalated as they always do with the Dweghom. One by one, the clans threw their warriors into the arena, siding with one or the other or simply for the Aghm to be had. For two weeks did this chaos last, as clan after clan decided to settle their disputes en masse. And for two weeks, Ragodosh stood in the middle of the arena, surrounded by his clan, waiting for the Mnemancers to confirm his victory. They never did for they never had to. When at the end of the two weeks they distributed Aghm based on the deeds they had witnessed, few would doubt his worth.

It must be noted that Ragodosh was not declared Raegh after those events. While the Memory of the Small War marked him for greatness, it took over half a century before the clans elevated him to that position. During those decades, he displayed not only Aghm and prowess in battle, but the ability to inspire, remain collected and answer challenges without bravado or cruelty but with unquestionable efficiency. Not until the insult of the insurrection of the Fire Thane, Alekhaneros, would his rule be questioned – and that challenge too, most believe he will answer in the same, cold and efficient, manner.

A Worthy Education: It is no secret that blood bonds hold no value in Dweghom society. Newborns are taken from their biological parents after their forced weaning at three weeks, or sometimes even before that, if their Memories seem to be forming already earlier. For all intents and purposes, the Clan is the children's single parent, the Hold is their home, and their crèche and training overseers the closest thing they will ever get to a guardian. This ensures the

development of a dichotomy of virtues, which are intrinsically linked. On one hand, every Dweghom develops a strong sense of identity and self-reliance, for in life they will be neither defined nor influenced by anyone's deeds but their own. On the other, that identity will be defined *through* the Clan and Hold, thus it is paramount that each and every Dweghom must display a strong loyalty to the Memories of the Hold – and the Dweghom as a whole. These seemingly contradicting values will prove necessary concepts for any Dweghom to understand and embrace, if they are to excel in the Aghm system that will dictate all aspects of their adult lives.

The first crèche all Dweghom are offered to is called the Golh, which, interestingly, is almost the same as Gol, the Dweghom word for an animal's den. There, Dweghom infants and toddlers are cared for exclusively by the Smaei, a rank of aged Mnemancers, whose primary focus is the proper physical and mental development of the fledglings. Smaei, meaning carvers, are rotated on a regular basis in the feeding of the infants, ensuring that a sense of safety and protection derives from all members of the Hold.

While no one would be blamed to imagine a joyless, dank upbringing, that is not the case, with plenty of care, stimuli and toys offered to the little ones, even if many of those are designed to cultivate their future perfect memories, which are already beginning to develop at this age. It is already here that the Dweghom first begin to memorize through toys the basic principles of the Hold's and Clan's memories, as well as the Memories of the Dweghom, from the hated rule of the Enemies, to the Breaking and even the Memory Wars, ensuring that all Dweghom Remember those early, defining events of their people and are sculpted, forged by their purpose. Most often it is also here that future Mnemancers are recognized and will be taken to the Mnemancy Hall, as their peers continue their Hold education in the Hekuro and Dekuro Dhenau – the First and Second Learning, or else the Primary and Secondary Camp. Advancement to the Hekuro Dhenau does not depend on age but rather on Dens, a type of proto-Aghm which measures not worth but one's capacity to learn, from as basic things as motor skills and responses to stimuli, to later the manipulation and use of toys or the performance in memory games. Usually reaching this stage at the very latest by the age of two, a toddler that is deemed ready is sent to Hekuro Dhenau.

The Primary Camp is where the first contact of Dweghom younglings with a more militarized structure will take place, with students expected to care for and maintain their clothes, beds and the crèche common areas. It is also when the first, basic understanding of the Aghm system is developed. Technically, children of such young ages cannot acquire or accumulate Aghm: the standards of success and worthy deeds are simply too different for such an exercise to have any meaning beyond diminishing a child's sense of self-worth or its relation to the Clan. Instead, their learning is evaluated on the same principles of Dens as before, which now instead focuses on their physical performance during games, their contribution to the chores, as well as their capacity to evaluate and apply anything learned and Remembered. During this age, Dweghom children receive little formal education and 'classes' are few and far between. Instead, younglings are assigned chores that are to be completed within the day, while allowed long

hours to play, invent their own games and either compete for or share the limited toys and the best foods provided. It is their behavior, performance of the assigned chores and overall instincts that are mostly evaluated by the Mnemancers at this age. The earliest true and fully formed Memories of each Dweghom are filled with their peers, portrayed as competitors and allies alike. It is sometimes already at this stage that Gifted youths are identified and offered to the Ardent and Tempered to continue their education, but the manifestation of the Gift can happen at any time, even after the Hold education is over.

Hekuro, the Secondary Camp, is most commonly joined around the age of three or four, and it is divided into three stages or classes. The first stage is Egro, and at this stage, the education on the Memories of the Dweghom in general and the Clan and Hold specifically, will both become more systematic by the Mnemancers. At the same time, Hold Warrior veterans will begin to complement the education received, with exercises meant to develop future weapon skills. Since, by this age, a youngling will already have developed fully its mnemonic capacity, afternoon hours focus more on the physical aspect with mandatory games, from races to hide and seek, with kids giving these their all, as advancement to the next stage of education in Hekuro still depends on Dens.

The second and third classes, Ahgro and Sehgro, are more connected, spending many hours of the day together and even sharing exercises, games and assignments. While the division is inevitably based on age, technically the ascendence from Ahgro to Sehgro is purely Dens-based. Still, one fundamental difference separates the two classes decisively, with Sehgro students already able to acquire their first, rudimentary Aghm. During joint assignments, they carry more weight in the decision making but also grater responsibilities. At these stages, the crèche effectively becomes a moving military school, spending nearly half its time roaming the Hold's halls. During those excursions, the focus of the classes is on the move itself, simulating military marches. Guards and patrols are assigned, usually in pairs of one Ahgro and one Sehgro student, camps are expected to be made and most hours are spent in different levels of weapon and military training. At the same time, some hours of the day will be used by the Mnemancers, who will go through all the Sealed Halls and read the Memories of individuals therein to the classes, ensuring that each youth's understanding and definition of the Hold includes not just the Living Halls, but the history and Memories of the Hold's Sealed Halls as well.

At this stage, the Mnemancer tutors offer more and more time to the officers assigned to the crèche's education, while their teachings focus on the understanding of the Aghm system – and not just in theory. For the first time, food is technically not provided for free; one must earn Dens to acquire it. In practice, this means little, as just by attending one earns enough to eat and slowly progress through the classes. But those who outperform can use the 'extra' Dens in bigger portions, spiced food, better clothing and may even be allowed to choose their chores and guard duties or have more comfortable lodgings for the night. Sehgro students can do even more, using the Dens to become team leaders of their peers and Ahgro students alike, having the responsibility of leading them through the marches, in competitive games and mock battles,

but also enjoying the fruits of their labor by gaining a portion of the team's Dens themselves. While in theory those extra points could be used to advance further faster, few have the mindset to "invest" their extra Dens in such a manner, choosing comforts or prestige and recognition by their peers.

Considering that attendants of these classes are in their physical adolescence, it is no surprise that fights are frequent between students. Violent outbursts are forbidden and the officers reserve severe punishments for transgressors (however, at the same time, Mnemancer tutors can award Dens for a good performance in a fight…). Any grievances are expected to be brought to the officers, who will decide the manner in which the argument will be solved, under supervision. Interestingly enough, the student needs not explain the nature of the argument, only to demand a settlement, with the officer deciding the manner based on the students involved, not the actual issue between them. Such challenges are designed to award increased Dens to both parties, should they win, for they often focus on the involved individuals' weaknesses, rather than their strengths.

Interestingly, Dweghom are not considered full adults until the age of forty. That means that, technically, one could spend decades in Hekuro classes. Physically, however, Dweghom fully mature by the age of fifteen and by the age of twenty at the latest, near all Dweghom have completed their formal education and have amassed enough Dens to be allowed Hold equipment and graduate. Regardless of Aghm, they won't be allowed to spend it in marriage and property until their adulthood. They also won't be assigned any rank above those of low petty officers and typically they will not be taken to proper combat, save for agreed upon non-lethal duels and Challenges between their Officers – but that is no law, merely a population conservation tactic, and thus is not always the case. Often, a Raegh will allow non-adults to "buy" through Aghm their right to real combat, fueling better performances from the Hold's youth.

Graduation is no ceremonious occasion. It is merely a transition, when enough Dens is accumulated for a student to acquire proper equipment from the Clan. In many ways, the only thing that really changes is the barracks in which students are to sleep – life will otherwise continue more or less the same way. In a more fundamental way however, graduation is the great equalizer. For those students who just managed to scrounge enough Dens, this is a new beginning, one looked for as a chance to escape mediocrity in the real world. For star students, there is a humbling shock involved in graduation: no matter how much your Dens had provided for you so far, no matter how praised a student you were and how many you had gathered to your following, your Aghm is next to nothing compared to your new peers. Either way, you know your place and you know what must be done to go further.

You are Dweghom.

5. Nords

Introduction: Whereas the Hundred Kingdoms and the City States might claim to be the main bastions of human civilization, one should not assume that this means they are the sole bastions of human might. Far to the north, beyond the monster infested Northern Seas, lies Manheim, home of the Nords. These people have led a savage and relentless war against their southern cousins; it is a war of raids and plunder, a war of countless battles and bloodshed, but above all it is a war of vengeance.

It would be easy to denigrate the Nords as bloodthirsty beast-spawn, no better than the monsters they lead to battle. To do so would belittle the achievement that crossing the White Wastes represents, it would demean the seamanship, courage and fortitude required to circumnavigate the continent and wage war on the far-southern shores.

But above all it would demean the achievement that survival, let alone dominance, in Mannheim represent.

Had the gods themselves created a crucible to test mankind, they could not have crafted a worse hell than the icy lands of the northern continent. This adversity has honed the Nords into one of the toughest and most dangerous foes one can encounter on the field of battle.

The first recorded name for this northern continent is Vanirheim. This is a human name paying tribute to the masters of that age, the Vanir. Very little is known of about them and their rule. What little is known is only through a cloud of myth and legend according to which the Vanir were Gods. Once split by internal strife, they united with their cousins, the Aesir, to cast down the dragons, subjugate their servants and rule over man from their seat of power, Yggdrasil, a vast tree that connected the bowels of the earth to the sky above. They were ruled by a god named Odin and bound by fate to die at Ragnarok. In preparation for this final battle, they selected the most courageous and resourceful of the Nord warriors and took them from their tribes at the moment of their death. When it came, the Vanirs' end, it came in the form of Surtr, a terrible being of light and fire. It had been foretold that Heimdallr, most vigilant of the Vanir, would sound his horn, wake the mortal hosts and herald the beginning of Ragnarok, the twilight of the Vanir.

This never happened.

Loki, the Visionary, the Outcast, the Traitor, struck Heimdallr down before he could marshal the Vanir and their host of warriors, the Einherjar.

Thus, throughout Ragnarok, the Einherjar slumbered in their golden halls. Surtr and his fire giants burned the land, razed Yggdrasil and grew drunk on the blood of gods and men alike before they were cast back at tremendous cost: the power of the Vanir was shattered and the gods themselves were lost.

In the aftermath of this terrible conflict, the Nords watched in terror as the Jotnar, fierce giants, spawn of Thyrm, Firstborn of Ice and Fire, slowly descended into the wasteland that Ragnarok had left behind. They came from their fastness in the icy peaks to punish humanity for the thousands of years of insult and injury they had suffered at the hands of the Vanir. One by one, the Nord settlements fell, as the Fimbulwinter followed the Jotnar, an unending winter on the land. Man suffered and died under Jotnar rule, populations declined precipitously and extinction loomed. The few that survived did so as slaves to the Jotnar, surviving in caves heated by lava flows at the whim and pleasure of their cruel masters.

Salvation, when it arrived, came from a forgotten place. Through accident or quirk of fate (in which the Nords place such weight), the Einherjar awoke decades too late to fight the battle they had been promised. Of the thousands selected throughout the years by the Vanir, only a fraction awoke. The rest passed away in their sleep or else, some claim, slumber still. Instead of waking up to a glorious battle against their eternal foes, they woke to find their gods dead, their lands a frigid wasteland in which humanity survived only at the whim of the Jotnar. This would not stand.

The untrammeled fury of the Einherjar raged across the icy landscape, sweeping the Jotnar and all their works before them in a tidal wave of blood and savagery, the released slaves at their sides.

With the Jotnar defeated the ice slowly receded and humanity established itself again in the north under the watchful eye of the Einherjar. Still mindful of their creators, the Einherjar led the surviving Nords as kings, leaders and seers, denying all claims to divinity, but guiding the Nords once more along the path of the forgotten Vanir, promising that the gods would return. But the gods did not return, and slowly the Einherjar were… lost.

Some simply vanished; others started losing their humanity, devolving into beasts and monsters, often dragging entire tribes in their wake. Others still were lost challenging those of their kin that had fallen. Today only a handful of Einherjar remain active, their names and legends guiding the Nords more actively than they ever did in person.

Through all adversities and challenges, the Nords have adapted, learning to endure their environment and co-exist with their fallen Kin. With their hatred and numbers renewed, they keep their vengeful eyes turned to the soft lands of the south, bent on revenge on the children of Surtr, who stole their destiny and their gods.

History

The Tale of Hjul the Fisherman: Gather round the hearth, now, gather and Nana will tell you the tale of Hjul and the Night of the Bright Tree.

It was the darkest night of the year. It had been a lean year, a poor year, for war was waging in the land and too many an end of day had found the nets of fishermen empty or as close as can

be. Hjul was no exception and, if anything, he was one of those mostly afflicted. But he was of sturdy folk, Hjul, such as our village makes; for he was indeed one of our own, no matter what others claim. And he was also a proud father and a pious man, venerating the Aesir and the Vanir as was proper. It was his love for his family and his faith in his gods that urged him to the sea that day, for in good Hjul's mind, both deserved a feast and tribute, on that most sacred of winter nights.

And so it was that he left the shores even before the bright hours had come, along with others that shared as brave a heart as him. Before the sun even rose, they pushed their boats on the ice, guided by their lanterns on their boats bows, until they reached the water, and from there they sailed straight south. At the start of the bright hours, he threw his first net with the others but, as was usual that year, the nets came up empty. As the bright hours reached their peak, he and a handful of others, no more, sailed further south and tried again but still their nets would come out empty. One by one, his fellows made their way to the frozen shores, but Hjul's pride was hurt and his honor wounded. Alone he sailed still, until the shore behind him looked distant and Mannheim was but an island to him. And there, as the bright hours faded finally, he threw his nets for a third time.

He waited long, in the cold and the bitter wet winds. He waited till the winter dusk settled and the lights of his fellows' boats disappeared in the north. He waited till dark came upon him and the only light in sight was his own, weak lantern. He waited 'till the longest night of the year swallowed him and even the flame of his lantern seemed to wither. Tucked in his furs, he waited, his boat rocking gently on black waves, his light a lone star dancing in the darkness, with its oil running out.

Hours passed and Hjul looked with desperation as his small flame withered. And he thought then that when the light run out, then he would know the gods did not wish for fish of him this year and he could return. So he kept his eyes peeled on that light. Ever withering, never gone, the light kept shining. That was the first miracle of the Night of the Burning Tree, for the oil never did run out.

Now below, the elusive fishes that hid and shied away all year long, they saw his pale, enduring lantern and to their desperate eyes, it seemed like the sun. For if you think that nights are dark for us Nords in winter, then know for the fish it is worse for they swim in the void. So lured they were by the promise of sun in the form of the small lantern, that they rushed in Hjul's nets by the dozens. And that was the second miracle of the Night of the Bright Tree.

Rejoiced and thanking the gods for their kindness, Hjul gathered his nets, full and rich for the first time that year. He laughed in the dark and prepared to come home only to realize, finally, what the price for his fish was. For in the longest night of the year, the dark of sky and dark of sea are one, the clouds hiding stars and the Glow of the Bifrost both. Hjul was lost and knew not where land was.

Now some say that that was the end of Hjul. Some say that he never returned and no one ever heard of him since. Others say he is alone in the dark still, his little fisherman boat floating in the long dark of the night sky and that by his lantern, the star Yulodi, do sailors know to find South and by the torch of his waiting wife, the star Ghilde, do they know to find North. But we of our village remember what others won't. In his dark desperation, Hjul saw a light appear in the North, bright and branched with a glow that touched the clouds; and he knew where the land was. He praised the gods and his laugh echoed in the dark, then thanked them as tears froze in his eyes.

It was the third and final miracle, the miracle of Hjul. A miracle that came with sacrifice; as do all things. For that was the night of Ragnarok and the Burning of Yggdrasil, the longest night of the year and all years since; the night we remember with Hjul's name and call the Night of the Bright Tree.

On the Gods of Yggdrasil: The first recorded name for the northern continent of Eä is 'Aalvarheim'. This is a human name paying tribute to the masters of that age, the Aesir and the Vanir. Very little is known of this time, and what is, only through a cloud of myth and legend. Under constant threat of the Jotnar, giant humanoids native to the land, the Nord gods wanted their people to be warriors, strong and enduring, with brave hearts and ready hands, ready to prove themselves to their Valkyries so they can be taken to Valhalla and join the Einherjar.

All this is reflected in the early Nord civilization. Their crafts focused solely on weapons, ships and fishing, while their tradition was mostly oral, since their history and the hellish conditions of their land did not promote such activities as studying and record keeping. Their society revolved around raids and fighting, with minimal agriculture, tribal art and almost non-existent formal education, beyond the teachings of sagas that venerated bravery and the gods. As a result, their oral tradition was rich, richer perhaps than any other civilization of their time. They would be collected and put to paper centuries after their conception and through them, the facts behind the myths and legends would be partly revealed.

According to the sagas, the Aesir and Vanir were Gods. Once split by internal strife, they united to cast down the Dragons, which had in turn defeated the Giants, in order to subjugate their servants and rule over man from their seat of power, Yggdrasil, a vast tree that connected the bowels of the earth to the sky above. They were ruled by a god named Odin and bound by fate to die at Ragnarok. In preparation for this final battle they selected the most courageous and resourceful of the Nord warriors and took them from their tribes at the moment of their death. Their end would come in the form of Surtr, a being of fire and light of terrifying power, and his children, the fire giants. They would burn the land, raze Yggdrasil and slay countless men and gods before they were stopped.

Had they scholars of their own, or an interest in the history of their hated foes, today's Nords would perhaps see the coincidences in history and timing as clearly as a scholar of the present

day can. It would take centuries for the reality behind their myths to be collected, analyzed and, in the end, understood. Still, out of the many Nord sagas, recounting the deeds of both gods and human heroes from those ancient times, most are impossible to translate into historical facts, if indeed they reflect any. Their significance in the grand scheme of things seems obscure, if at all existent. Three major legends, however, can paint a very specific picture, one that would shape the image of history: the gods themselves, the Einherjar and Ragnarok.

It is safe to assume that the gods were in fact a powerful faction within the Exiles, powerful enough, perhaps, to have won the original conflict with the dragons. The source of this power seems to have stemmed from a civil war among them and, unlike all other instances, their subsequent reunification. Some scholars theorize that their veneration as gods and protectors from the giants, native to the frozen land of the north, could have also added to their power, in a manner similar to the ascendancy of Hazlia. The truth is, however, that there is little concrete evidence to support this and perhaps there is no need to make such assumptions. The Nord Gods were the only example of cooperation between what are known today as Exiles of the Spires and the Weavers. Considering their civilization had crafted the Ways and could travel between worlds, one can only imagine the miracles they could accomplish together. This unique cooperation lends credence to the distinction of Nord gods as “Aesir” and “Vanir” as well as the legends of Yggdrasil itself. After all, no other combination between Spire Biomancy and Weaver Life-Binding is known.

These gods of legend (Odin, Thor, Freyja, etc.) seem to have been kings or leaders within their community. Loki, powerful and dark figure within the Nord mythology, was possibly one as well, but an outcast of some sort. It is easy to imagine an alliance between the two races would have been based on some moderation of the use of Biomancy on behalf of the Spire lords. Loki’s appellation as the father of monsters and the roles those monsters would play in Ragnarok could fit neatly into a narrative as a Spire Biomancer who refused to accommodate his peers. Legends such as those of Fenris, Jormungandr, and even Loki’s own shapeshifting, suddenly take on a more disturbing aspect.

Under this light, the promise of Valhalla and the legend of the Einherjar, chosen warriors of the gods, also take a very disturbing turn. If the gods were truly Spires and Weavers, what were they doing with those warriors that proved to be the best? Today, some know it to be the Einherjar Project.

The Rule of Ice: The three centuries of the Fall would see the decadence and gradual destruction of the Old Dominion, threatening the very existence of humanity in the continent of Surtoris. In Aalvarheim, the fate of humanity would mirror this almost to the last detail. The burning of Yggdrasil saw the very foundation upon which Nord civilization was built turn to ashes. Human society in the north was largely based on the belief of Valhalla, the constant strive to prove one’s self in the eyes of Odin and his Valkyries, in order to be lifted from the realm of mortals and into the Eternal High Table, where the Einherjar, glorious warriors of the gods, would wait for Ragnarök.

With the end of the Last Crusade, however, Ragnarök was over. The prophecies that had shaped the Nords for generations had come to pass, only to be proven false. The gods were dead, together with a host of mortal warriors and working hands, the Einherjar were nowhere to be found and the Valkyries had disappeared, leaving even the greatest and most heroic deeds unrewarded. For decades, only Loki's monstrous children would serve as a sad and deadly reminder of the gone might of the Nord pantheon, roaming the land mad and unchecked, plaguing upon humanity and wreaking havoc wherever they appeared. Lack of manpower and superstitions based on generations of tangible religion would bring to a halt any raids to the rich lands of the south, for few were those who would dare brave the wild waters of open sea without the blessing of the Gods. Such superstitions were not without some merit, for, in the absence of gods, the Sea Jotnar that plagued the deeps would slowly start testing their might against human ships. For the first time in their remembered history, the Nords stood alone to face the challenges of the North.

It is a testament to their mentality and mettle that the name 'Mannheim' is first mentioned already at this time, the Nords laying claim on the land they were supposed to tame anew. But the limitation of this seafaring and raiding nation to land, coupled with the dismantlement of its entire pantheon, would bring a cultural and resource crisis, equal to that suffered by the Old Dominion at the same time. While war between the different Nord settlements had never been lacking, the mortal spiritual leaders that had held it in check had now lost credibility and importance. Bloody chaos ensued. In more than one instance, over two or three warbands came battling each other on the same field and at the same time in a bloody free-for-all that would see entire settlements be left without warriors and therefore either quickly abandoned or its people forced into servitude.

In time, this would perhaps prove a blessing in disguise. The smaller settlements were absorbed by larger ones and, more importantly the scattered warbands would slowly turn into cohesive forces, capable of securing the settlements and even take the offensive, hunting and killing the monstrocities that plagued them. Mortal leaders with a solid grip on their power would eventually rise and lead with iron fists, tackling problems as those were rising to the best of their ability. Manpower would stabilize, as the lack of raids kept all capable hands stranded on Mannheim, and mankind would slowly gain control of their own fates. Proving their mettle without gods, the Nords had risen to the challenge that their land was, to stand their ground where no one else had ever dared, while plans for raids were being made and Sea Jotnar be damned. It was a true and hard victory for mankind of the north, even if it was short-lived. For, with the protection of the gods gone, it would not take long for a forgotten enemy to resurface.

Defeated and banished ages ago by the Aesir and the Vanir, the wildest of Jotnar had sought refuge to the harshest, most unforgiving places on Mannheim. But the winds of power had changed in the north and its howl on the mountain slopes sang a different tune. From her icy throne on Fjeltorp, highest peak of Mannheim, Hel, Queen of the Frost Giants and, some say,

Loki's Daughter, had watched the smoke of burning Yggdrasil rise to rival the mountain she sat upon, the flames that swallowed the World Tree dancing in her cold, blue eyes as she smiled.

"*What a wonderful new sun this is*" the Ice Eda claims she remarked "*and how wonderfully it will fade. What a glorious night of cold and darkness it will dawn*".

And slowly she turned those eyes to gaze upon the lands of mortals.

Sub-Factions

Exalted: Survival in the frozen lands of Mannheim demands a particular mindset, ruled by the immediate and practical concerns of food and safety. Thus, the Nords have not forgotten the basic tenet for leadership: Power belongs to those who can seize it. While having the blood of a living legend coursing through your veins, granting you strength, speed and power beyond mortal limits, does not grant you the right to leadership, it does make it a lot easier to claim it. As a result, while not all of Nord leaders share the blood of the Einherjar, many do.

Aside from this, leadership in the Nord lands takes a very simple structure. At the very top stands the High King, a position created in the aftermath of the Jotun War recognizing the need to unify the Nord lands to ensure survival. The title is mostly ceremonial, naming a first among equals rather than an Emperor or Overlord. The position is commonly held by Arnbjörn, the Einherjar ruler of Aarheim, but he has relinquished it to challengers who have shown promise before.

Below stand the Konungyr. Each of these men has earned the right to sit at the High Table at the banquets held in Aarheim by the High King. Although little is known regarding the powerful Oath the Jötnar swore to the Einherjar, it is suspected that the power to compel these powerful beings is shared with those present at these gatherings, but it remains hearsay and suspicion. None have dared anger the Einherjar or undermine the Oath by sharing its secrets.

Until they are chosen by the High King, those who would become Konungyr possess almost as many titles as there are leaders themselves. Some claim the title of Kings, others call themselves Jarls, others are called Chieftains, others still would be hard to distinguish from bandit leaders. However, each of these Lords is surrounded by his Chosen Men. While the term refers to one's personal guard, in reality they are much more than that: bodyguards, friends, vassals and champions. These warbands can display tremendous variation, as each man has been hand-picked by the Lord to reflect his chosen form of warfare.

Half-Bloods: More so than any other culture, myth and history are woven into a single tapestry for the Nords. Their legends still walk among them as living, breathing proof that the myths are very much a part of their lives. But the Einherjar were meant to be powerful, glorious combatants who would save the world in a single, incandescent release of fury on the field of battle. They were never expected to survive, much less breed…

The Half-Bloods are the first, and faintest, shadow cast by the Einherjar: mortal vessels, twisted by the exalted blood they inherited from their divine parents. The descendants of these mighty heroes often inherit portions of their awesome gift, but regretfully lack the control or grace of the parent. Stronger, faster and possessing senses far beyond the ken of mortal men, as children of the blessed Einherjar they should occupy a position of prestige and power… but the truth, like in almost all cases with the Half-Bloods, is somewhat more complicated.

The Ogres possess the strength of ten men, but the intellectual capacity of a small child while the Valdeyr, the Skin-changers, possess the amazing ability to shift into beasts and back, but with none of the control of their ancient forebears. The Stalkers have inherited their keen senses of the greatest of hunters… and find themselves repelled by the scents and sounds of community. Even the Trolls, shunned and feared as they are, were once numbered amongst the great tribes before hardship and impossible choices forced them down a dark path.

It would be easy to differentiate between the Exalted and the Half-Bloods by placing the first closer to the Einherjar's divine nature and the Half-Bloods closer to their bestial devolution, but this is an unfair oversimplification. The two, after all, walk hand in hand for the Nords. The difference rests not on power or control, but in ambition: should a Half-Bloods individual possess the will to regain control of his gifts he could very well walk in the footsteps of the Einherjar. But whether by choice or simply passive acceptance, the Half-Bloods heed the wild call of their Einherjar blood.

Mortals: Surrounded as they are by the glorious remnants of a bygone age, it is an understandable mistake to discount the threat the mortal populace of Manheim represents. This would be a mistake, almost invariably a fatal one. These are a people who have survived Ragnarök, the Twilight of the Gods, the Fimbülwinter that followed and the Rule of the Jötnar. Mere survival in Manheim is an accomplishment and when one faces Nord raiders, one does not face those who merely survived, but those who thrived.

Each year, hopeful youths gather at Aarheim or one of the lesser coastal settlements for a spot on the long ships. Competition is fierce, but seldom lethal, as manpower and healthy workers are always in demand in the harsh Nord lands. Those that succeed are rewarded with one of the few chances at advancement in the North: raiding.

While a single successful raid can see all of the crew return wealthy enough to support the entire community for years, a successful series of raids can find a humble raider chosen by his liege to join his Huskarls. Huskarls, and their families, need not toil for survival. Their sword arms and discipline are in such high demand their lords see to all their needs allowing Huskarls to spend their time training and sparring, making them a formidable force on the battlefield.

Particularly successful and ambitious Huskarls often rise to the rank of Jarl themselves, employing Huskarls of their own to protect their lands and property. From there, they are only a single deed away from being recognized by the High King and joining the ranks of the Nord Konungyr at the High Table in Aarheim…

Deeper in the shadows, often hidden behind misdirection and bodyguards, walk the Shamen and Volvas of the North. The Shamen are powerful figures whose auguries can send the raiding fleets hurtling across the icy expanse of the White Wastes. The Volvas have been preaching the divinity of the Einherjar to all who will listen and their cults have been growing steadily despite fierce opposition from the very objects of their reverence. Relegated to advisory roles, their words and workings are seldom ignored by those in power, for their influence plays a pivotal role in the motivation and guidance of the Nord war hosts.

Character Portrait, Timoleon the Lion: Emaciated and frail, Timoleon has fought from the moment he was born. He fought the elements for his very life on the night he was born as his father exposed him to the elements to judge his worth. Surviving that fateful night, he fought to prove his worth and earn his every meal daily. As he grew, he fought for the regard of his father earning his moniker, the Lion, originally meant as an insult which eventually became a mark of grudging respect.

When his father died, he fought for his rights as the eldest son, first against would be usurpers who saw him as weak and his hall ripe for the taking but ultimately against his brothers who sought to usurp him. When the world burned and the Gods called, Timoleon fought for his faith. When the Gods fell in battle and the Jötnar reigned, long before the Einherjar arrived, Timoleon fought for survival alone against overwhelming odds. When the Einherjar arrived, Timoleon once again fought, this time for freedom.

Except for some of the eldest and most powerful of the Einherjar, there is no more relentless foe in the Nord lands, and certainly no man who has done more for the survival of humanity in the Mannheim. He has, however, won no great battles, slain no foe in personal combat or claimed any land.

His legacy is one of foresight and guile, of retreats and misdirection, of patience and ambush. Above all it is a legacy of survival and victory, he is the Eldest of the Shaman and has long since become something more than man.

His powers awakened on the very first day of his life, as his parents exposed him to the murderous cold of the Mannheim nights. His is gifted with a powerful affinity to *two* elements with control over both Air and Water, an exceedingly rare gift among men. Blinded by this rare asset, many people fail to fend of his real power: his native intelligence. In fact, Timoleon did not master his gifts until well into his middle age tutored, some say, by the gods themselves. Until then everything he achieved was done through sheer effort, audacity, and guile.

When the gods fell and the Jötnar came, Timoleon remained the only human ruler who did not bow to the new overlords. Acknowledging that he could never hold land against the raw power, both physical and elemental, wielded by the Jötnar, he forsook his lands, but saved his people by adopting a migratory lifestyle. Living off the land and using his powers to scout the paths ahead, he and his tribe managed to stay one step ahead of his opponents. His continued survival and defiance kept the flame of hope and rebellion alive during those cold hard years.

Although he lost many men, many joined him throughout this ordeal, drawn to his banner by the growing legend of the man who defied the giants. He shared his knowledge and power freely, training any who displayed the Gift in the ways of the Shaman.

By the time the Einherjar arrived, Timoleon had been fighting for decades and the shamen had become an established force. Old and wizened, he was already older than all the men under his charge who whispered that he had been old and bent when they had joined his banners as youngsters. Recognizing his expertise, several the Einherjar heeded his counsel and fought where and when he directed. This alone may have tipped the balance in the war, for while the Valkyries argue that the Einherjars divine power and righteous cause gave them all the power they needed to cleanse the land, the truth is that the Einherjar were few and their foe, mighty.

Situation in Mannheim: While it could be easy to dismiss Nord culture and politics as crude, simple and brutal, any who made that mistake would not survive for long. Brutal, yes. Crude and simple? No.

It is easy to forget that Mannheim has seen the rule of Dragons, the Yggdrasil Spire, the Jotnar and only recently that of man. All of these were cast down in cataclysmic battles, but their remnants still linger, stirring this frigid land. Arrayed against forces both seen and unseen, stand the Nords, led by the Einherjar and a handful of others who know of the ancient nemeses that lurk in the frozen shadows of the north.

Alas, only a handful of Einherjar remain: Angbjorn, the Mountain, ensconced in Aarheim, is doing his best to guide the budding civilization of the Nords away from the many dangers that surround it. Graymane, the Wanderer, remains the first and last line of defense in the frozen north, fighting himself as much as the beasts that prowl the darkness. Hrokki, Deathbringer, remains a recluse who fights as and when he can. Beyond these, only a few more remain who can still communicate with man, let alone care for the fate of man. The rest have been lost; whether to battle like Svarthgalm or to their own bestial natures, it matters little.

Their task would be difficult if conditions were ideal and they are far from such. Nord society, once monolithic in its support of the Einherjar, is riven through with tensions and simmering conflicts. To the south, prosperous raiding Jarls resent the tribute they pay the High King in Aarheim when most of their prizes go to the northern Jarls at the yearly Allmeet. Some return from their raids with massive treasures, the likes of which have not been seen in centuries and they are loath to part with it. Arguments that the northern Jarls have the hardest and least rewarding task of holding back that savage frontier fall upon the deaf ears of their increasingly proud and prosperous southern kin.

This alone would be nothing new. There have ever been tensions among the denizens of Mannheim, fueled by necessity and competition for resources but there are many effective and straightforward ways to settle such differences in Nord traditions. Now these traditions steadily give way to subterfuge and guile, beyond the fields of single combat but leading to the battlefield. Sightings of short and crooked shadows in the halls of many Jarls sow doubt and

mistrust among peers with honeyed words and promises of treasure whispered in darkness. Thus emboldened, a few foolish Jarls have pushed things further than ever before. Wielding weapons of unprecedented craftsmanship they have readily shed northern blood in one sided duels that threaten to break out into full-fledged feuds among the Jarls. This would do nothing but weaken Nord society.

Compounding this increasingly tense situation is the growing assertiveness of the Valkyrie Cult. Although they profess a total devotion to the will of the living gods, it is difficult not to notice their views on how matters should be handled are often at odds with those of their chosen divinities, the Einherjar. A cynic would further quickly note that there are far more feasts and ceremonies around those Einherjar who have fallen in battle or devolved into a bestial state than there are with those who can voice an opinion that might disagree with their vision. Angbjorn, never the most cautious or careful of the Einherjar, has already clashed with the priesthood, but lacking their political savvy he has been outwitted and isolated. The Valkyries would rebuke his efforts, recasting themselves as the victims of a cruel campaign of lies and misinformation orchestrated by the shamans to foment bad blood between the Valkyries and their gods.

The resulting repression of the shaman cult has weakened a critical pillar of support and counsel the Einherjar depended on to influence the more independent Jarls. Those now find their new attractive, female advisors, the Volva, irresistible in their council, as they garner power by agreeing with their Jarls' more ambitious and aggressive tendencies, instead of offering wise counsel.

It would perhaps be natural for such seems to be the nature of man, Nords or otherwise: when prosperity and riches lie before them, tensions invariably rise as competitors clash even in a land as dangerous as Mannheim. The dangers of the land are far from over for the Nords and their division would seem untimely… suspiciously so, in fact. Bad omens increase in the readings of bones, runes and entrails, as the land itself shakes and shivers. Seers speak of giant serpents that stir in their sleep and entire parties of hunters are lost without explanation or trace. The Stalkers speak of unnatural monsters, the spawn of the mad god Lokki, awake once more and sowing chaos without pattern, cohesion or purpose. And when the Stalkers speak, the wise listen, and what they hear speaks of a reawakening in the far, far north.

Still, this is far from a lost fight for the Nords. The Graymane has been seen south of the Long Ice for the first time in centuries. Some even claim to have seen him in Aarheim and speculate he has joined forces with Angbjorn as they had of old. Following their savage cull, the shamans have regrouped. Rumored to be led by Althung, the hoary ancient himself, first of shamans and eldest of the Nords, they have begun exerting their power, reminding the Valkyries, the Nords and their enemies, that these old men still wield real power, and that not *all* power flows from the edge of the sword…

To the careful observer, it is clear that Mannheim and the Nords are changing, the only question that remains is: how?

Einar Banamathr, the Revenant: Little is known or remarkable about the life of Einar Banamathr, the Revenant of the North… before he killed a God and became the most hated and feared man in Mannheim.

Einar was a hunter, one more nameless denizen of the countless hamlets that sought to survive in the far north. His cunning and skill earned him a good living, which had allowed him to marry and raise a small family. Had he lived anywhere else, this could perhaps have been the sum total of his life's achievements, dying of old age surrounded by a loving family or, more than likely, died out on the ice, eaten by some ice spawned monstrosity. But this was not Einar's fate. He lived within the territory of Jöffur, the Boar God of the North, and thus both their dooms were sealed. To understand the one, we must delve into the other.

Once revered as one of the mighty Einherjar, Jöffur had been a warrior of great renown. His reckless aggression, fiery temper, and stubborn refusal to die had been the stuff of legend even before he was chosen and became an Einherjar. His ascension only heightened these traits further, allowing his heedless charges to singlehandedly fell jötnar and shatter shield walls. His reckless nature, however, ensured that he was one of the first Einherjar to abuse his powers. His mortal frame, unable to contain his godly gift, soon started changing to accommodate his divinity. This heightened his aggression and fueled his anger, encouraging him to use his gifts more often and recklessly. In a few scant decades, the proud Einherjar was gone and Jöffur, the Divine Boar of the North, was born.

Even in this devolved form, Jöffur served the needs of his people. Given his territorial nature, the Boar patrolled his range ceaselessly and some vestige of the hero to his people must have survived deep within his damaged psyche despite the transformation, for the Boar never attacked settlements. Those who lived within this range developed a delicate truce with the God-Beast, planting fields of northern wheat and barley as well as hardy northern orchards along his route, that their protector might feast and retain his strength to drive off other predators. This cycle survived for centuries, as the protection offered by the Boar made the planting of these fields possible, ensuring a tenuous balance that allowed the population to prosper.

Fate, however, is fickle and that balance could not last forever. Deep in the northern ice fields, the Boar encountered a mighty foe; some whisper it was the spawn of Jörmungandr, the World Serpent, but none have traveled that far into the ice to find out. While the Boar survived this encounter, he was gravely injured. He did not descend for three winters and, without his seasonal patrols, the local predators grew ever bolder, encroaching into his territory. Unprepared and ill-equipped to deal with these northern apex predators, the population was forced to abandon the fields they planted as tribute, focusing instead on their own survival.

When the God beast returned, it was immediately apparent something was wrong. Its mighty pelt was torn and bleeding, and all intelligence had fled its maddened eyes. Plowing through the barren fields that had once sustained it, the Boar, maddened and hungry, turned its attention on one of the fortified villages that tended to them. Nothing was left. Even the wooden palisade that had protected it was consumed and not even one of the villagers had survived. Two more hamlets were lost to the Boar's rampage before his migratory path led him onwards, but the villagers knew he would return.

Terrified by this display of divine might, the denizens of the Range ensured his fields were planted and ready for their next season sacrificing hundreds to malnutrition, predatory attacks, and frostbite to ensure their god was satiated. Their efforts were all in vain.

The God Beast had consumed the flesh of man and developed a taste for it.

So it came to be that the man who would become Einar Banamathr returned to his village after a weeklong hunt to find it in ruins and the remains of the entire population, his wife and child included, in a steaming pile of refuse amid a gargantuan abandoned rooting hollow.

One can only imagine what effect this had on the proud man, but the consequences were only too visible. The man who would become Einar Banamathr gathered his belongings and set out into the ice to hunt down a god. Six months later he returned. The God Beast did not.

He took up the name Einar, lone fighter, and settled into a small cabin by his old village, determined to spend the rest of his days hunting down the beasts that would now plague his people. Initially shunned and ridiculed for his preposterous claim, the coming months and turning of the season proved his point: the God Beast was not returning. People started noticing things about him; he hunted *Fenrir* and did so *alone;* the cloak of bristling fur he wore was made of a single piece with no stitching or seams and his bone headed spear never dulled or needed replacement. Slowly but surely people were forced to accept the truth: this man had killed a God.

Pride, fanaticism, and ambition all ensured that in the following months the challenges came fast and furious. They ended just as quickly once Einar slew Angrim Ó-Fœra, Jarl of Langdal, the most feared warrior in the north. Under Nord law, these challenges had made him one of the wealthiest men in the North, as the wealth of his challengers became his. Along with the wealth came the unwanted title and responsibility of Jarldom and, reviled and hated though he is, the people in the Reach know him to be their best hope for survival the coming years.

Character Portrait, Osesigne, Daughter of Dorm: *Though through mists and night is covered, the future is written, the Fates are set. But a destiny is forged, not offered. Such is Mannheim. Such is life. Such is our burden and our task.*

Mannheim is no stranger to turmoil and violence. This has traditionally been the case due to necessity, in a way. The limited resources, the monstrous threats, even the displays of strength between members of a society that venerates bravery in war, they all contribute to a

tumultuous life, on top of the struggle for survival. Lately, however, the power struggles in the North have a deeper foundation. Traditional positions of influence have been shifting hands between different groups and there is a war being waged on the very hearts of the Nords, no less bloody than any other conflict of Mannheim. Osesigne Dormdottir is considered a key figure in this new war.

While the Volva do not have an established hierarchy, at least not one that is seen by outsiders, Osesigne is widely considered as a mover of pieces among their numbers. She will often visit a Hall, paving the way for another Volva to be accepted as an advisor there, but she will also be seen to any Hall that already listens to the honeyed words of these seers, spending hours with her sister Volva in private counsel. From wherever she appears, however, Osesigne will not leave alone. Her words may vary but their result is the same. Be they passionate speeches on the market, entranced prophecies before the Hall, whispered counsel in the ears of leaders of even gentle, private words of comfort to a mourner or of courage to a fearful young warrior, Osesigne inspires and captivates, reigniting the faith to the old gods and a belief of their return. While she denies many, those that end up following her are not few.

Such passion and inspiration is rare in the North… and not often welcomed in a land were even fishermen and women can fight proper if sufficiently roused. Many are those who speak her name with anger and contempt for the chaos she has sewn but few in her presence. Her wild beauty matched only by her sharp wit, fierce passion and demanding disposition, Osesigne knows how to wield all of these tools with skill and few end up denying her in their Halls. Fewer still would dare if they wanted to. There are stories about what happens to those that do, from sicknesses that decimate an entire village, to bouts of particularly bad weather that don't seem to acknowledge the seasons and even of lightning storms filled with the angered moans of the dead gods. Most rational men readily say that these are, of course, simply tales.

There are, in fact, many tales about Osesigne, both grand and simpler; about her life and deeds, about where she was born and raised, who she was before her destiny was revealed to her and she followed the Volva. Never dismissing or correcting any of them, Osesigne Dormdottir prefers to leave such tales unaddressed and if herself is asked, she replies with a single word: *Åsespa*.

The *Åsespa,* the Prophecy of Ose, is an epic, an edda known to all the Nords. While it revolves around the words of a single legendary seeress, it is considered a tale about all Volva. In it, Ose, one of the original mortals to be offered the power of the Vanir to see through the mists of both past and future, is brought back to life by Odin, in order to consult her and benefit from her wisdom and powers both. Most of the edda is the words of Ose herself, who speaks of the future to Odin. Events both greater and lesser and of both gods and mortals in Mannheim's history, are revealed to Odin by Ose, leading to Ragnarok which, however, is never described. The edda instead recounts how Ose sees she will have to face trials at the hands of Loki, and goes on to number them and describe how she will overcome them yet on the same breath she adds that she will fail to the one that matters most. Odin then scolds Loki for his future plans,

offers his sympathy to Ose but he bids her take heart for a destiny bright and prosperous for gods and mortals, despite her own; words filled with tragic irony, as the audience of the edda understands how the trials are to be a distraction by the God of Mischief so she would not see his betrayal during Ragnarok and reveal it to the Gods on that day.

Many are those that rush to claim that Osesigne is none other than the seeress of the edda herself, thus her response when asked about her life. But her allies, and her enemies, see more to her answer. Ose's response to Odin in the edda is that the burden of her failure is not hers to bear. Her very last words in the edda call for her daughters to carry it and repay the gift that was given by the gods. Those who have spoken to her even once see that Osesigne Dormdottir carries that burden with fervor and speaks of a gift repaid and the Gods' return.

Instigator of violence and turmoil or leader of a new era that rekindles the old faith, Osesigne Dormdottir has led both the Volva and Mannheim as a whole into a new world. Words and prayers long forgotten echo around the frozen lands of the North once more; old places of settlement, long abandoned since the rule of the Jotnar, have been revived and filled with those who follow her and some say enjoy better crops and gentler weather, tempting more to settle there. For a living person, it has hard to say which of the things told about her and her followers are true and which are tales. Harder still seems to guess what her next step will be. While it is doubtful that the shamans will allow their influence to be idly offered to the Volva, and many are those Jarls that saw good, strong men and women leave their side for hers, Osesigne seems undeterred; and there are some who claim that a boat was seen sailing, named *Åsespa* and carrying her south…

Song of the Last Fire-Child: Mannheim is home to many grim tales and horror stories although to the Nords, truth be told, they are simply known as "stories." If the darkness and cold does not fuel one, then the monsters that plague the land or the violence of its people do. One legend, however, holds a special place in the cautionary tales grandmothers spin for their grandchildren: the Last Fire-Child.

There are many variations to the tale but some of its elements always remain unchanged: the Fire-Child is an immortal survivor of the army of Surtr, who – plagued by guilt over its crimes and blasphemy – now roams the land and burns those who offend the gods it once helped kill, while abducting others to exact its vengeance. Beyond that, however, the tale changes. In some cases, it is a Fire Jotun, who descends upon remote villages, burns them to the ground, leaving behind some impaled denizens around a grand pyre that is fed by the body of the rest, like scarecrows sending their shadows dancing around the cinders of their village. If those bodies are not found and properly burned in time, the legend says, then they will descend from their grisly resting place and join their maker. In others, the Fire-Child resembles a Braeon fae creature of dark fire, stealing younglings from their parents. This is a manling with dark, red hair who stalks the shadowed corners of a house. The way to spot it is to look for two red, blazing spots for eyes, appearing in the darkness; often in the gloom of a moonless night's forest or under one's bed, in the darkest corner of the room or among the shadows of coats in one's

closet. A last variation speaks of an immortal warrior of Surtr, whose dead body, clad in its ancient crusader armor, seems fueled by fire, as soft sunlight seeps through its dead, cracked skin. He is most known for challenging young travelers on their way to the Kapp-a-Görask. Some it lives dead and scorched for the carrions to feed on. Others, it takes with him. In all cases, it is said the crusader sings a taunting rhyme while he fights:

The soldier's just a bo-o-o-o-y,
The soldier's just a bo-o-o-o-y,
Take his mind and make it toy,
The soldier's just a bo-o-o-y.

The Last Fire-Child mythos is well established and widely spread in its different forms, throughout Mannheim. Eventually, the tale lost much of its former fearfulness, to the point that children often use a counting-out rhyme based on an old song. While children mostly use the last one or two verses in their games, for a "fairer" counting-out the full song is used, much to the disturbance of the few southerners that have witnessed it:

I like pain
My nightmares are my dreams
My soul is slain
My thoughts speak only in screams

Spread it! Spread it! Spread it! Spread it!

Today I heard His voice,
He told what to do,
He told me I must spread it,
That's my desire too.

Ones like me I'll gather, oh, happy band of fellows!
And all the world will tremble under our lifeless bellows!
We'll burn creation merrily, hidden from every glance,
Beyond its light we'll celebrate and with the shadows dance.

But if He thinks it's all for Him, then let Him guess again.
I said I'd serve him – and I did – until my dying breath.
A boy he made a soldier, a boy shall end him then,
I am the Last Fire Giant my flames will yet burn Death.

But first they will burn YOU!

Whatever the truth behind the legend, few things can be said are true: throughout modern Nord history, villages have been burned and raised overnight, with pyres of the dead made in

their center and impaled bodies around it. Children have gone missing on occasion, from their midnight walks in the woods, as much as from the safety of their own beds. And many a lonely aspirant to join the raids by proving themselves have never made it to Kapp-a-Görask or back home after doing so. These, of course, in the unforgiving land of Mannheim do not mean anything by themselves. But if there's anything Mannheim and the Nords teach us, is that their frightening tales often fail to capture the horror of the reality behind them.

Three View on Mannheim: *"I know an ash standing, Yggdrasill named, a tall tree bright, its roots holding Vanirheim as one, tying loam with stone. Under its shadow all is warmed, land and heart and mind. Beyond it, true cold reigns o'er all the eye can see; a land dangerous twice over, for predator's fangs and cold's claws reign over white on ground and white on trees and white on sea, 'til Summer comes and golden light reveals."*

-The Old Edda

Many are the names by which Mannheim is known and few of them are flattering. Crucible of Monsters, Cradle of Horrors, Frozen Hell, the Barbaric North, the Everdark… All claim a portion of the truth, but they all also ignore one thing; the land of the Nords holds a wild beauty beyond compare. From its high fjords scarring the dark northern seas to the imposing mountain range of Gald, its peaks towering above endless dark forests and snowed fields, the land of Mannheim holds a dangerous alure, one reserved for some of the sturdiest, harshest and most enduring people the world has seen.

Lying north of the continent of Surtoris, Mannheim is an island, created by the rise of the Gald mountain range. Indeed, the Gald with its many peaks, perpetually covered by snow and ice, forms the backbone of the island and while none but the Jotnar can endure its cold, it dominates the landscape, regardless of where on Mannheim one stands. By many, it is considered a different continent than Surtoris, despite its smaller size, as the prevailing theory is that the island's rise is, in fact, a result of Surtoris moving to the south, allowing for volcanic masses to rise to the surface. While it is true that a huge part of the cavern system below Mannheim is volcanic, its activity is dormant and there are no known active volcanoes on the island. That being said, most of the Gald range has not been explored and recorded by humans.

– Professor Nikkolas Schten
University of Pravia

The learned fools of the south speak of the birth of mountain ranges and geological incidents. Good for them. Tradition tells another tale, one befitting the people of Mannheim.

Mannheim is the Land Between, a fortress world built on the empty, bottomless sea of Ginnungagap, by the god Bur for his people to withstand the flames of Muspell below colliding with the frozen mists of Nifl above. This myth is unsurprising. It speaks of the same endless

conflict between primordial equals, as told by the native peoples of Eä all over; it is the First and Last Saga, Creation and Destruction locked in their endless duel. Unlike in the other tales, for the Nords it is hard to tell which is which; Muspell and Nifl are both destructive natural forces that spell doom for mortals and gods alike.

The Aesir and the Vanir wove their words into that tale but genesis for the people of Mannheim tells the same tale as those of other peoples with one major deviation: Stability, equilibrium, what southerners name Balance, never came magically and out of nowhere to bring peace to the cosmos and offer a home to mortals. This age is not safe, and peace never truly settle over the world. The battle between Primordials is ongoing. It is only the stronghold of the Land Between that allows for gods and mortals to endure and it was **built** by the labor of the gods, lesser beings to such powers as Muspell and Nifl, struggling to persevere against the powers that be.

The southern… sages may be right: Niflhel, the icy hell in the middle of Nifl above, could very well have been inspired by the icy peaks of Gald, its freezing mists born from the windswept snow of its slopes. Muspell could have derived from the volcanic caverns below Mannheim and the fiery nightmares it has spewed on occasion, now mostly forgotten. Right or not, however, those thoughts are meaningless and lose sight of the importance of the tales; like the right to enter Valhalla, anything and everything is only gained through fight and struggle. They are not choices for the people of Mannheim; they are the means for survival, a state of existence.

Aettir and Tings: Prominent among the numerous general misconceptions of southlings about the Nords is that they are one people. That is only as true as it is to claim that the Hundred Kingdoms are one people; which is to say, it is absolutely wrong.

The first and most ancient distinction is that between Nords and the Sapmelas tribes, which the learned among the Nords would reluctantly admit are considered to be possibly the original denizens of the island. Unlike the Sapmelas, however – which the Nords vaguely and erroneously divide into four great tribes while they are in fact different peoples with different cultures – the Nords have been historically united, when Mannheim was still Vanirheim and all Nords venerated the Gods of Yggdrasil. This part of their cultural past undoubtedly offers a sense of common identity but only when comparing themselves to the rest of the world. When Mannheim matters are discussed, they are more than ready to distinguish between different groups among them.

The most common and honored distinction is that of the Aettir, clan divisions based on blood and marriage. One's Aett is part of one's identity, be they man or woman, and relationships between Aettir heavily influence behaviors between individuals (that being said, not all Nords can truly claim they are members of an Aett and most are, in fact, either indifferent towards them or unrecognized). Alliances and pacts, forged generations ago, honor-bind members of Aettir, and friendships between ancestors are fondly remembered and provide fertile ground for future ties. Failing to abide to such traditions and, even worse, betraying trusts and ties

between Aettir, can invoke not just the wrath of gods but, more immediately, can cause blood feuds that will haunt generations. While the ancient edas and sagas are often recited by skalds, it is the tales of such feuds, stories with roots deep-seated in history about vengeance, love, honor and betrayal that move the Nords most and form the foundation of future sagas.

There are nine great Aettir on Mannheim, often divided into lesser clans and families, with a recent group, the so-called "Tenth Aett," the Saemearhing, flying banners of a seahorse against a teal field by Captains that value bonds of salt and water before those of blood. Distinctions between Aettir are vague and vaguer still are the reasons of their feuds; in truth, most Aettir have clashed so many times in the past that whenever aggression needs to be justified it is easy to do so. During the Gloom of Midday (namely the 2nd and 3rd centuries P.R.), blood feuds between the Aettir reached such a violent crescendo that without the direct intervention of the Einherjar, it is likely that the Nords would have driven themselves near extinction. But intervene they did and thus the greatest and most enduring cultural distinction between the Nords was born: the Tings.

To describe the Tings as councils would not be entirely accurate; this was the form they took later, when the blood feud wars of the Aettir subsided and the Einherjar gradually stepped back from the leadership of the Nords. Originally, the Tings were courts, forged by prominent figures of different Aettir and presided over by the Einherjar. Their role was to settle disputes between the Aettir, deciding what compensation was appropriate for damages suffered and what penalty befitted crimes committed, in order to satisfy the injured party before a blood feud was sparked. Their decisions were not binding save by honor, but one did risk invoking the wrath of its presiding Einherjar if the Ting's voice was ignored.

For the Nords, the advantage of this system was obvious: the Tings had the opportunity to judge each case separately and there was no guarantee that the same offense would invoke the same response. The disadvantage, of course, was equally obvious: final word rested with the presiding Einherjar and mood, preference and above all personal ideology would come to play a part in the decisions. In time, this created a certain predictability: Helga Nornsdottir, head of the Ting in Aarheim, would base her decisions on her view about the fate of the Nords and if or how the offense afflicted this. If the offending Aettir risked crippling or diminishing the ability of the Nords to raid, by damaging a ship or killing a capable captain, one could expect a severe response by her Ting, for instance. Svenn Trollblood, on the other hand, always based his decisions on the traditions and edicts set by the old Gods, naming them as the only lawmakers the Nords had known.

These different approaches came to dominate the Tings' decisions and, eventually, they would become more streamlined, at least in their philosophy. As the Einherjar receded from public life, slowly claimed by their "gifts," the Tings would come to rely on past decisions to continue this tradition and the Tings would change. While "law-making" would be too strong a term to use, such was loosely the role that the Tings would come to play, interpreting the traditions set by their predecessors and the Einherjar that presided over them. In fact, with the exception of the

Dannting in the west, where Dan the Lawforger once presided, no Ting has any log or catalogue of past decisions put in writing. Much like they do when it comes to their history, in this too the Nords rely on memory, song and tale to remember the past.

More importantly, with time, the surrounding areas of each Ting would come to regulate their behavior according to its decisions until, eventually, those would become part of tradition. Customs would be adhered to and differ vastly from those of their neighbors. Thus, distinct cultural groups would be forged and simple things like the manner a shield must bear its colors, proper greetings between different Aettir or styles of clothing – all details contributing at one point or another in a case presented to the Ting – make it obvious to a Nord about before which Ting a visitor (or invader) appears.

With the exception perhaps of the Fimmting across the sea, these loose distinctions do not hold any administrative value save for convenience and tradition. There are no real borders or lines between the Tings that truly and honestly divide their peoples, nor does any Ting claim dominion over an area. In fact, many a settlement will participate in more than one Tings, possibly for different matters in each. In theory, any leader of a settlement, any head of a family or elder of an Aett could appear before any Ting to present and discuss their case; but not knowing a Ting's traditions and mentality can bring forth unexpected results and thus it is avoided. Despite this, the importance of the Tings in the cultural divisions of the Nords remains; the closer one lives near a Ting's city, the stronger the feeling of belonging and the stronger its influence over their every day lives, their sense of justice and their customs and in times of turmoil, some certain camaraderie between these different groups has already been shown. For now, the High Table serves as the great equalizer and unifier, the Ting of Tings so to say. But with Angbjorn increasingly indifferent to the power plays of his Konungyr and the political and even spiritual unrest that boils under the surface of Mannheim, it is possible that such differences will be brought to the forefront, utilized by those who revel in division…

Great Explorers. Great Storytellers: When most denizens of the Hundred Kingdoms think of the Nords, certain – perhaps stereotypical – traits come to mind. Raiders, drunkards, barbarians, savages, heathens, and other such flowery traits are attributed to the denizens of Manheim. Yet, despite the somewhat warranted infamy – as Nord raiding parties are numerous and quite unpleasant to deal with – there is one aspect of these northbound people that often goes unrecognized: exploration. For all intents and purposes, the Nords are inherently free spirited and adventure-driven, completing ever more daring deeds to fuel their illustrious sagas. Such a mindset, along with unparallel seafaring skills, makes for tenacious and fearless explorers – with some of the culture's most famous voyages bordering on the realm of myth due to their sheer scale.

One cannot approach the subject of Nord explorers without mentioning the figure that acted as the source of inspiration for many would-be adventurers – Hjul the Fisherman. Hjul's story famously fuels the holiday of the Night of the Burning Tree; it is a tale of hope and sacrifice both, for those walk hand in hand for the Nords. And yet the tale's many iterations inspired

more than a tradition for the longest night of the year, and for many the brave fisherman sailed beyond the edge of all known things, becoming a star to guide sailors. Harald Giantsbane was one of the many souls that lusted to find the star-sea of Hjul for himself, wishing to sail his vessel beyond the end of all realms.

Before the last act of his story played out, Harald Giantsbane was a warrior of great renown, conducting many successful raids against the milk-blooded denizens of the south. Tales tell of Harald's inhuman strength, with some claiming that the Nord warlord once arm-wrestled a mountain giant and won – shaming the humiliated titan to the point of self-exile. So many were Harald's victories in combat, that his cape was made from the severed beards of his defeated foes, leaving no room for anyone to doubt his might. One fateful night, bloated with mead and at the presence of the High King's court, the Giantsbane made a promise that would alter his legacy forever – he would find the world's edge and empty his bladder from the precipice of eternity. To fulfill his pledge, Harald gathered a fleet of twenty ships and, dismissing the notion of Hjul sailing south, he set sail northwards.

Harald's famed fleet was gone for two winters – until a single ship returned to Manheim on the eve of the third. Aboard were a scant few of the Giantsbane's men, along with Harald himself. The great warrior – whose extremities had fallen off from frostbite – was now a raving lunatic. He and his men spoke of a great wall of ice; of titanic monsters that lurked beneath the frigid sea; of savage, white-furred beasts that walked on two legs; and of unrelenting winds that flayed flesh down to the bone. Considering the state of the remaining crew's sanity, many saw their tales as maddened ravings. Despite the unreliability of Harald's accounts, henceforth known as the Mad, the denizens of Manheim found one common point of agreement from his tale – sailing into the far-flung north is folly of the highest caliber and will only bring about disaster.

Many winters after Harald's doomed expedition, another explorer sought to find the world's famed end – Inga Magnadottir. Inga, a Volva's chosen who had forsaken her calling for a life of plunder and adventure, thought to sail westwards for her mission – arguing that the world is a flat circle, and that she could reach the edge by following the tamer western sea currents. Departing with a modest five ships, so as to not be hampered by numbers, as was the case with Harald, Inga was gone for three full winters – shocking everyone when she once again reached Manheim from the east! Magnadottir's arrival came with some truly groundbreaking claims – with many Nords denouncing her and stating that she was madder than Harald. Inga declared that there was no end to the world to sail beyond, but that the world went on until it brought you back. She spoke of faraway continents and islands which housed nations, eternally locked in conflict; she spoke of horrors that lived beneath the waves, and of a land broken in two, as if the world serpent itself was wounded there. While Inga's tales are widely dismissed as the product of madness, the seed of speculation has blossomed within many still – with some brave souls wishing to replicate the same perilous journey and uncover the truth for themselves.

Yet, of all the explorers to grace the many sagas of the Nords, none are as famous – or infamous – as Ulric Thorketill, who simply came to be known as Ulric the Unlucky. Ulric, like many of his kinsmen, craved for adventure and the boasting rights that accompany it, showing notable skill as a warrior from a young age. Accompanied by a natural affinity for persuasion and storytelling, Thorketill managed to gather a sizeable following before departing for his first recorded escapade. His target was the coast of Braeonia, where the Nord leader terrorized its poorly defended fishing hamlets and villages; that, though, quickly proved to be a boresome activity. While attacking a small, unguarded settlement, Ulric managed to capture the local wisewoman, who carried with her many secrets and morsels of forgotten lore. The witch, in an effort to save her people, bargained with the warband leader – offering to disclose the location of a hidden druidic village in return. The settlement, the woman said, was nestled deep within the forests of Braeonia and housed invaluable treasures within it; she assured the Nord captain that it had but a few scant warriors, offering bleak resistance to the manpower of his warband. Ulric, delighted with the idea of true adventure, left a token garrison of men at the conquered settlement and made his way to the secretive location – guided by the veiled forest paths that the wisewoman showed him. Alas, misfortune struck upon arrival to the secret village: the inhabitants, while few in number, managed to kill everyone but Ulric himself, who made it back to his few remaining men at the coast. Sailing back to Manheim, the terrified Nord spoke of forest-dwelling superhuman warriors, who gained unnatural strength by drinking a specially brewed potion. The strongest amongst them, claimed Ulric, was a large, fat-ladened bear of a man, who could hurl a warrior with a single flick of his finger. Almost everyone considered Ulric a liar, believing that he was trying to hide a shameful defeat by the pathetic southlanders.

The most famous and final of Thorketill's many escapades – with all of them ending in failure, under outlandish circumstances, and with Ulric as the sole survivor – was his search for Surtr's birthplace. Once again, the Nord's silver tongue garnered him a sizeable warband, promising treasures untold to those that would follow him into the extinguished empire of the Fire Children – Surtr's fallen Dominion. The northmen travelled south and faced the east, reaching lands with ash-clogged skies and the bitter touch of Fimbulwinter still lingering within them. It is said that Ulric managed to reach Surtr's mythical birthplace, the First City that gave him form, but no treasure was to be found – only cryptic knowledge and lore that the Nords had no use for. Empty-handed, worn-out, disease-riddled, malnourished, and preyed upon by unnatural horrors, the warband made its way back towards the coast, taking what they could from the few locals that still inhabited this diseased region of the world. Tired of Ulric's false promises and machinations – as the captain began devising a new journey, for when they reached the sea – the story concludes with Thorketill's men betraying and killing him, slicing open his back and spreading his ribs out like wings. Ulric's saga ends with his body being quartered and buried in the Dying Lands of the east-facing south, so that his cursed unluck might not burden anyone else again. Yet, Ulric's legacy survives through his salvaged journal – with many believing his writings to be self-indulgent boasts or fabricated entirely – cataloguing tall tales of superhuman

villagers, mythical lost cities, and feats that best represent the Nords' obsession with adventuring and exploration.

The Tale of Ugr Bride Stokkr: The sagas of the Nords are no strangers to tragedy. From the horrifying end of Bòttegar the Bright to the heart-wrenching fall of the Forgotten Valkyrie, and from the treason Bryhilde suffered in the Saga of the Blooded Ring to the cold death met by the Shieldmaidens Eske and Anneli in the Tale of a Sea Apart, the tales of Nords are filled with loss, pain and the suffering of loves. The events of such tales are harsh, cruel even, meant not to teach or inspire but rather warn that life can be cruel, people can be petty and mean and Mannheim is ever deadly. Few tales capture these Nord truths more than the Tale of the Ugr Stokkr, a tale only as old as a hundred years or so.

Stokkr Okmodir grew in Jatréheim, a small town, deep in the deadly forests under the shadow of the eastern Gald, living off hunt and timber trade. Stokkr was the daughter of a widowed huntress, Ama Bodildottir, daughter of the servant girl Bodil and Ulfyr Valdirson, Jarl of Jatréheim. If Skalds are to be believed, Stokkr was born in the forest, on top of a tree, while her mother was besieged by a vargr below – thus the name, meaning log or piece of wood. Defying the fate of most Ugr-mothers, Ama survived but was never able to walk again. Turning to her father for aid in her disability, she was shunned and forced to live and raise her child on the charity and goodwill of others. Ulfyr, the tale goes, had no use for her or her malformed brute of a child.

As months and years passed, however, Stokkr grew. She grew strong and grew a lot, her simple mind instilled in the kindness of the people whose charity had allowed her and her mother to survive. Before long, she was the go-to person for any hard labor in the small town. While she never asked for anything in return, and the tale is filled with stories of people taking advantage of her, many were those who ensured that neither hers nor her mother's bellies would go empty, nor their hearth cold. It seemed, then, that her future was set; but the Norns had other plans for her. Witnessing her might after she single-handedly saved fleeing woodcutters from three vargar, old Ulfyr saw in her the means to secure his rule in his old age, and even expand his domain and influence in the meantime. The next day, he greeted her as a hero of her people and invited her to live with him in his longhouse. Her simple response was as humble as it was defining, giving her her surname: "and mother."

With both Stokkr and Ama welcomed in splendor in the Longhouse, it did not take long for the Jarl to put her to work. Showering her in titles and honorifics, he had Stokkr accompany him in his visits to neighboring towns, entering her in games and duels in a blatant display of power. One by one, other dwelling leaders began to pay homage to the Jarl and Ama and Stokkr wanted for nothing. With his domain secure, Ulfyr planned to take her on raids but this was the one thing Stokkr refused to do, fearing water and not wanting to leave her mother alone for so long. During the following winter, Ama 'faded away', her weakened body finally giving up, as the Jarl put it to her. The next summer, Stokkr was on a ship, bringing riches on top of power to the Jarl.

As is often the case in such tales, the Jarl became consumed by his own power hunger, dreaming of a seat in the High Table – but as his own body was failing him, old age catching up, that hunger turned to paranoia. Everyone was out to get him, at first from his recently acquired fiefdoms, then from his own town or even his own sons. One by one, the Jarl's enemies, imaginary and real alike, fell at the hands of Stokkr and the poor Ugr maiden, from a favored child of Jatréheim, became its accursed terror, the same people that had lovingly cared for her now spitting before the earth she walked, knowing her gentle heart would not reciprocate.

It was at that time that Stokkr first laid eyes on Leif, son of Lof, Jarl of Veidaheim. Lof had long bent the knee before Ulfyr but Leif had other plans. Noticing Stokkr's adoring eyes, he approached her, spinning tales of love and adoration. Leif proved careful, calculative and very patient. He kept his 'secret love' with Stokkr going for two years, just until he finally managed to remove his father and take his place. Then, he made his first attempt to turn the Ugr against her ruler; the only thing standing between them, he claimed, was the old Jarl. With the innuendos missing their mark, eventually Leif decided on a more direct approach. The time, he said, had finally come for them to be together but the only way to do that was to elope. He warned her of the night he would come for her and told her that those who knew of their love and wanted to end it would try to stop him, bidding her to protect her love, when the time came. With the Jarl's strongest protector under leash, Leif gathered his best swordarms and attacked the city under cover of night, murdering and pillaging as they rushed towards the longhouse.

Bathed in the light of houses aflame, Stokkr's self-knit wedding dress and wild berry bouquet shone red and yellow – as did the tears in her eyes, confused and terrified, as her beloved and the people of her town clashed. Then, with little guidance but what Leif had given her, she did what she was bid to do: she protected what she loved and fell upon those who attacked the people whose kindness had raised her.

Alone she fought the raiders, and alone she died. But her actions had allowed the town's warriors to raise swords, shields, and a proper defense. Come morning, she was found surrounded by a mount of dead bodies, Leif's body pinned under hers, and the tale was born. Reaching to embrace him, Leif stabbed her, only to be crushed under her.

It is always hard to separate myth from fact when it comes to the Nords. But, in many ways, it matters little. To this day, the birth of an Ugr is considered a good omen in Jatréheim and local-born Ugr are fed and taken care of by the town. Last, but not least, seasoned warriors and shieldmaidens, dressed in red and yellow, join the Bride's Chosen, an elite unit of warriors. In winter and at times of peace, they assist the townsfolk with labor but during raids and in times of war, under the banner of a golden wedding ring crowned by wild berries, on a red field, the Bride's Chosen are a force only fools would ignore.

6. W'adrhŭn

Introduction

The first recorded mention of the W'adrhŭn is a canto of the saga of Charles Armatellum that speaks of his peace treaty with the primitive tribes beyond the Claustrine Mountains. For centuries, the tales of nomadic savages with giant, pre-dominion beasts that dwell beyond the edges of civilization have been a source of entertainment, delight and lazy, abstract deliberations amongst self-titled scholars and historians. The truth lies so far from these theories and witticisms as the wastelands and oases of the W'adrhŭn lie from the luxurious foyers these discussions are usually held in.

It is perhaps understandable why the learned of humanity would be so dismissive in their views of this young race. The W'adrhŭn are indeed a fledgling civilization, one that was forced to scrap a living off the limited resources available in the Wastelands beyond the Claustrine mountains. This lack of resources has forced them into a harsh living, often violent as different Tribes clash for sources of food or water, with equipment and attires that look near-primitive in the eyes of the civilized Kingdoms. Such abstract descriptions are vaguely known by the learned elite. It is also known to them that the W'adrhŭn are "just another" creation of the Spires, therefore they are conceived much like the witless drones the Exiles throw on the field of war to die at their masters' convenience or the terrifying but mindless abominations they have unleashed upon the world. But unlike prior attempts and creations, the W'adrhŭn were never meant to supplement their retinue of monsters, killers or expendable troops. They were meant to be a race of true warriors, an unstoppable vanguard force capable of securing the Reclamation of the Exile homeland or ensure the Directorate's dominance on Eä once this mission was accomplished.

To create the W'adrhŭn, rather than work on the basis of Exile strands, the Biomancers of the Spires sought to decipher the weaves of countless donor species that presented the desired characteristics in order to replicate their features on a completely new and hybridized structure. While series upon series of creations proved failures, unable to "quicken" into awareness, one day, for no understandable reason, no discernable metric, the bodies of two breeding pairs woke within minutes of each other, their physical capacity far exceeding original expectations. Some would later attribute the outcome to the strands of humanity weaved into their design. Others would speculate that the regenerative abilities of echinoderms or reptiles were responsible; such strands had been mixed in the many different attempts to urge quickening with insufficient research about the possible mutations they could trigger. Others still would attribute the awakening of the Four to the powerful – perhaps too powerful – primeval essences infused into the final design; a dangerous experiment that many had cautioned against only to be overruled. Whatever the reason, these four prime specimens awakened and looked upon their creators with hungry, knowing eyes…

The alarm this raised among the Spires forced the project to be revisited time and time again, while the four primes were kept in stasis. When the Exiles finally unleashed the W'adrhŭn on

the world, their designs were not entirely finished. Forced by the threat of Dweghom Marches, the chaos of the time of the Fall and the terror inspired by the utter destruction of a Spire, their creators marshaled their population against their foes. Victory was not their purpose; in typical Spire fashion, the W'adrhŭn were to be sacrificed so that the population of the Spires and their research might escape. Even if many regretted the outcome, the destruction of the primes at the hands of the Dweghom was seen as an acceptable loss. Indeed, three of the primes – under the monikers of Famine, War and Death – perished. But their sacrifice allowed the fourth prime, Conquest, to secure a future for her people. The W'adrhŭn endured, escaping the Dweghom and even managed to endure the Fall and the Long Winter in the Wastelands of the Old Dominion. Sheltered by the broken Spires that once gave them life, the fledgling race would learn to survive, battle Spire creations, tame the prehistoric beasts hidden in the bowels of the Spires and, most importantly, forge their own sophisticated civilization.

Given their unique origin and purpose, however, it should come as small surprise that the W'adrhŭn are tough. Your average W'adrhŭn towers over a human, with an average height of 7ft (2m). Their bone density far surpasses that of humans, with bones extruding from the shin and forearm providing significant protection even for an unarmored W'adrhŭn along these vulnerable limbs. Their rib cage has fused into a solid mass encasing their vital organs while their skin is tough and leathery with keratin deposits along the abdominal region to protect this vulnerable area. They are heavily muscled, with tone and elasticity of the meanest W'adrhŭn approaching human maxima.

The designs of the Spires and the multiple experimental strands forged to achieve their creation survives within every W'adrhŭn, making the race highly variable. The Warbred are the main example: Towering over their brethren, Warbred are bigger, stronger, and tougher than their brethren, throwbacks to the earlier generations of W'adrhŭn the Spires had sought to breed. Complications during childbirth leading to unacceptable attrition among breeding females led to the scrapping of this design, but clearly their efforts were not entirely successful. Today the Warbred labor under a pall of mistrust and segregation, as their birth almost always claims the life of the mother, stigmatizing them for life given the almost religious regard W'adrhŭn have for their womenfolk. As a result most Warbred join the cult of War, seeking solace in the perfection of the craft they were created for.

All W'adrhŭn, in part thanks to the acute sense of hearing they possess, have a natural facility with the beasts that roam their lands. The Speakers, while less obvious that the Warbred, represent another unique variant of the W'adrhŭn race with much deeper social and developmental consequences. Speakers do not rely on empathy and a deeper understanding of the mind of their companions, but are capable of communicating with them directly. The origins of this power are shrouded in speculation, but it is quite clear that, like the gift of sorcery, it was one unintended by their creators. Speakers today are invaluable to a growing W'adrhŭn society and population, their companions serving as beasts of burden, aiding in construction and defense of growing W'adrhŭn habitats and their burgeoning populations. Their value has been

quickly recognized in many growing tribes, the eldest speakers of whom have been given a seat at the tribal councils, which until recently were dominated by the warriors and the mothers.

However by far the most remarkable feature the W'adrhŭn possess is their hearing. Unlike humans, Exiles or any other humanoid, their hearing physiology is not limited to their ear structure. Additional structures along their jaw and nasal cavity provide them with a hearing prowess that far exceeds human or even Exile norms. They are capable of navigating in pitch darkness, based merely on the echoes and sounds they perceive. A curious development is that W'adrhŭn are capable of control the sensitivity of their hearing, allowing them to focus on one source or frequency to the exclusion of all others, a necessary trait to prevent their sensitivity from overwhelming them. This allows them to communicate across great distances through the use of pitched voices or vast drums. This is the source of the W'adrhŭn uncanny coordination, their ability to communicate in a manner completely beyond human capability to replicate. This also grants them a tremendous advantage on the battlefield, where W'adrhŭn leadership can remain in communication over the din of battle without resorting to messengers. Their hearing is also an integral component of the feared blood trance; the meditative trance that grants Blood Berserkers their situational hyperawareness allowing them to reach unheard of levels of coordination on the battlefield.

However it must be noted that these adaptations come with a price. W'adrhŭn consume prodigious amounts of food to support their unique physiology. To address this, their designers modified the W'adrhŭn digestive track, allowing them to digest food that would sicken or possibly kill a human but this alone is not enough and this was known; their merciless digestive systems were designed to survive with cheap, otherwise unwanted materials – while their demanding appetites would ensure population control if needed. Coupled with the limited resources of the Wastelands, this commanding need would forge the very culture and civilization of the fledgling race.

In the end, the W'adrhŭn represent the first truly collaborative efforts between the Spires – in itself, that is a testament to their design and their capability to perform the role they were intended to. They are not a race of mass-produced, bloodthirsty fighters with overgrown muscles. They are beings designed to wage war; to fight, overcome obstacles, survive and perform under extreme circumstances, with the mindset, senses, physique and endurance to match. They are also not mindless savages that by some accident of fate managed to survive the Fall. They were designed to think, calculate, form strategies and adapt to those of their opponents with cunning, guile, creative solutions and true intelligence. They managed not simply to overcome the fatal dangers of the Wastelands during and after the Fall, but thrive and form a civilization from scratch which, while young and perhaps rough, is complex, inventive, values music and has perfectly adapted to their surroundings and circumstances, enduring for centuries where no man has dared to even attempt to settle. The humans that so readily dismiss the W'adrhŭn as savages have only to look to their own past to see just how great the potential of this young race's destiny is… and how well equipped it is to meet it.

Sub-Factions

The Tribes: The beating heart of the W'adrhŭn race are the tribes that make it, a fact that their living goddess well understood. While the goal of each tribe is to provide food and shelter to its members, the tremendous dietary requirements of the W'adrhŭn distort this picture significantly. By far the largest focus of each tribe is securing sustenance and almost every social structure and norm within a tribe is dedicated to the harvesting of food and the protection of its stores.

The archaic social systems used by humans to determine who will be a warrior and who a farmer are simply too corrupt and inefficient for the W'adrhŭn to survive in an environment as hostile as the one they live in. Only the best of the best are allowed to become warriors, not because that level of martial might and skill is needed, but rather because so many are needed to provide food for the race to survive. Both of these are solved with the application of a single, ruthless solution: The Trials and resulting Bound. The reality of the situation, however, is that the tribes need far more food gatherers than warriors to ensure their survival; only the best are elevated to Braves after the Trials, while the rest are Bound to the tribe, providing the hands and labor for its development and the cultivation of its food. While limited in choice and freedom to pursue their own future, the Bound are deeply respected within a tribe; their status protected not only by the vital role they serve but also by the unbending will of the living goddess and thus are given significant voice in the Tribal Council, the governing body of each tribe.

The Tribal Council has a single structure replicated across all tribes. Five members sit and decide matters of weight and importance for the tribe's survival with a single member representing each of the powerful influences within a tribe's structure. A Chieftain represents the tribe's warriors, the Mistress represents the Bound, a Predator stands for the Speakers, the eldest priest of the cult of Conquest is named a Scion and represents all the Cults, while a shaman represents the elders. This way the interests of the Tribe are voiced equally, with the Elders, those W'adrhŭn who have managed to live over four decades, often given a ceremonial tie breaking role in strongly contested decisions.

For lesser, day to day decisions, the tribe is guided by either the Chieftain or the Mistress, but it is very important to understand that while the Council might govern the tribe, they are not considered the leaders; this role is reserved exclusively for the Ukunfazane, their living goddess. To facilitate her efforts, the Ukunfazane has appointed three Matriarch Queens who rule over each oasis in the goddesses name while she is absent. Once there were also King Consorts who fulfilled these roles as well, but rebellion and betrayal have taught the goddess to avoid the complications inherent in sharing rule with a male.

Today the tribes rule over almost the entirety of the W'adrhŭn population in the Wastelands, the vast majority of which is focused in the three oases that sprang from the broken Spires. A few small nomadic tribes wander the wasteland, skirting the eastern edges of the old dominion,

surviving through trade with the oases for the treasures plundered from the ruins of the old dominion and what food their hunters and herders can supply.

Population pressure, magnified by the dietary requirements of W'adrhŭn themselves and compounded by the growing pressure the rekindling of the Pyre to the east has brought, is slowly but steadily pushing the tribes into new territories. As the restless dead of the old dominion march, most Wasteland Tribes, reinforced with a few of the more powerful tribes from the oasis began moving west, across the mountains where they might survive the onslaught. A few remain to harry the foe as he crosses the wastelands and provide their goddess with much needed intelligence. Those tribes that remain will turn the oases into formidable bastions, where the reduced population and the expected attrition will allow them to hold these crucial strongholds despite the coming conflagration.

The Cults: The efforts by the Spire to create the perfect warrior race have carved and indelible mark upon the W'adrhŭn. Their predilection towards violence is burned into their neural pathways, making their blood boil with chemicals that heighten their rage, searing the pleasure of violence into their very flesh. But that is not the most difficult struggle she faces in granting the W'adrhŭn a future of their own choice. The greatest challenge are the marks seared into the very soul of the W'adrhŭn race when the primordial powers of War, Death and Famine quickened the first breeding pairs, the Primes.

The gods alone know what would have been unleashed upon Eä had these primordial iterations been allowed to survive and thrive. Even centuries after their death, the primordial power of these nascent goods still echoes through savage impulses of their distant descendants. Only the living goddess' innate understanding of the fundamental natures of her siblings' power has given her a chance at seeking, not just to temper these impulses, but to harness them into powerful influences that might strengthen the W'adrhŭn across the centuries.

To limit the influence the other primes could exert even in death, she created four Cults to guide and channel the worship and influence of her siblings, separating them from the Tribes and thus limiting their interaction to closely observed, almost ritualistic, exchanges. In time, the Ukunfazane was able to twist the urges and instincts born of her siblings' nature.

While his primary manifestation remains one of conflict and power, the Ukunfazane was able to shape War's affiliation to Earth and mold him in the role of a crafter as well. To this day the Cult of War are the only W'adrhŭn allowed to cast and forge metal, the spiritual manifestation of their God. Unable to reforge the overpowering finality and narrative power of her sister, the Ukunfazane instead drew upon her connection to blood and was able to weave that connection into her people, recasting the Cult of Death as midwives and healers. Rather than embracing Death, the Cult accepts the reality of it, but battles it to their last breath. Almost exclusively composed of females, this Cult is, not surprisingly, the most popular and influential amongst the Tribes for the work they do is invaluable. For Famine, the eldest and most dangerous of her brothers, the Ukunfazane could do little to salve the hunger and drive his fanatics evinced, but

could help guide them in a direction that raised her people. Today, the Cult of Famine travels the lands exhaustively, almost compulsively, seeking new stories and myths to record, relentlessly expanding the modest collection of W'adrhŭn historical records, myth, song, dance and stories that shall one day become the cultural heritage of the W'adrhŭn. In battle, their passion and zeal are such that the already impressive calorific burn of their metabolisms reaches terrifying new heights.

Perhaps the most subtle manipulation of all was wrought upon Conquest, the Ukunfazane, herself. Her understanding of the primordial nature of Conquest has over the years evolved away from the literal embodiment of expansion and domination to one of vision, victory and adaptability. Rather than looking at her young, vibrant warrior people as a tool for the domination of others, she has instead chosen to see where she and her people might thrive on Eä and guide them there. Her Cult is the most prevalent and widespread of the four, for it is her priesthood. They are in charge of all education and cooperation between the tribes and cults. Taking in only the most gifted and brilliant of minds, the Cult of Conquest is a spawning ground for leaders and visionaries across the tribes. Even so she is a creature of conflict and drive and her cult's warriors are exceptionally trained and equipped. In times of peace, they act as judges and instruments of her often iron will, while on the field they are capable of fulfilling almost any role at a moment's notice.

It is a fine balance that the Cults walk, torn between the divine mandates of their living goddess, their societal purpose and the instincts infused by the primordial forces they express; and for generations, this balance has endured, allowing the W'adrhŭn to prosper in the harshest of environments. This is due in no small part to the amount of control she exerts over them, not hesitating to cull those that would stray too much from the path she has laid out for them. And in a way, the Cults' existence describes the entire society of their race, both in the way this fragile equilibrium sustains the very fabric of their civilization and in the way it is sustained. It is a straight path the W'adrhŭn walk, even if one achieved by being pulled in different directions by equally unforgiving forces.

The Speakers: d

All W'adrhŭn, in part thanks to the acute sense of hearing they possess, have a natural facility with the beasts that roam their lands. The Speakers, while less obvious that the Warbred, represent another unique variant of the W'adrhŭn race with much deeper social and developmental consequences. Somehow drawing on the primordial link between all the strains that were woven into their own being and that of native beasts on Eä, the Speakers do not rely on empathy and a deeper understanding of the mind of their companions but are capable of communicating with them directly.

The origins of this power are shrouded in speculation, but it is quite clear that, like the gift of sorcery, it was one unintended by their creators. While little is known about this gift, two things are clear: The first is that there is a strong bias among the males and females of the W'adrhŭn

as to what species they have an affinity towards: female almost always find it easier to bond with carnivores, while males most often bond with herbivores. The second is that those possessing it can train it further, allowing them to slowly learn how to communicate with beasts they have no kinship to, but those who were born without it may never develop it.

The first recorded instances of this gift rose a few decades after the Fall of the Spires. While fighting for their very survival amongst the ruins of the Spires and the lush oases that had sprung there, a few W'adrhŭn found that they could not only understand the beasts and thus calm them, but literally speak to them. The distinction is more subtle than one would imagine, as without sufficient intelligence most beasts are only capable of only the most rudimentary of communication: the real difference comes when the beasts possess enough intelligence to be able to converse back.

To date, the species that have been capable of doing so have been limited. First amongst those that could are the Raptors, an ancient strain of bipedal carnivorous beasts that ruled the wildlife in the time of dragons. Common ground and understanding was quickly found amid the dangers of the primeval oases, leading to what is more akin to an alliance than the domestication of the species. Even today the skill of the W'adrhŭn beastmasters is such that beasts roam freely among the W'adrhŭn freeholds, needing neither lash no leash to know their place and purpose. Since then, selective breeding has started paying off and recently ever growing numbers of placid herbivores are awakening to sentience, capable of communicating back, even if in very rudimentary fashion.

Speakers today are invaluable to a growing W'adrhŭn society and population, their companions serving as beasts of burden, aiding in construction and defense of growing W'adrhŭn habitats and their burgeoning populations. Their value has been quickly recognized in many growing tribes, the eldest Speakers of whom have been given a seat at the tribal councils, which before were dominated by the Chieftains and Mistresses.

Spotlight

The Lost Lands: The cataclysmic Fall of Hazlia created a massive, dense haze of ash and dirt, plunging the world into an endless winter. In time, however, the black clouds that covered the world would be dispersed and, when light and warmth crept back into the world, it awoke nature from its century-long sleep. Enriched and strengthened by the raised dirt and ash of the Fall, the barren lands quickly gave way to lush fields and bountiful soil. This would contribute to the rapid expansion of the Hundred Kingdoms and the City States; as the Long Winter receded, these civilizations would have the space to expand in new and rich lands, capable of supporting an ever-growing population.

Doomed forever under the expansive rain shadow of the Claustrine Mountains, the Wastelands never benefited from this latent blessing. Bereft of rain and water, the barren dirt, rock, and sand of the gray and lifeless Wastelands would turn, at its lushest points, into a featureless

scrubland, where only the most enduring flora and fauna could survive. This was the harsh land that housed all those of the W'adrhŭn tribes which had not secured a place in the lush oases created by the broken Spires. Eventually, however, these nomadic tribes would discover a hidden paradise; in time and with the rejuvenating power of the Fall's aftermath, the lands east and south of the Abhoreth oasis, but still far enough from the dark Pyre whirlwind looming over Capitas, had exploded with life.

It serves, perhaps, as proof that nature works in cycles, that the fields which the W'adrhŭn were learning how to work had in fact been cultivated innumerable times in the past. The "new lands" of the nascent tribes used to constitute one of the lushest and richest areas of the Old Dominion: the Galtonni Province. Expanding in the west and north from the Spire of Abhoreth and the borders of the desert lands beyond, to the hills and mountains surrounding the Valley of Herm in the east and to the sea in the south, the Galtonni Province would become the richest region of the Old Dominion, save for Capitas itself. That stretch of land would once again been settled, this time by the former nomadic tribes of the Wastelands.

News about these lush lands spread fast among the roaming tribes and settlement began even faster. But the endeavor would prove neither easy nor peaceful. Generations of harsh living had developed a culture that tied raids and violence to survival, and this new paradise was too good a prize for any one tribe to claim. The wars that followed were as numerous as they were disastrous. As corners of this lush land were claimed and settled, the W'adrhŭn would come to realize that nothing in their culture had taught them how to exploit fertile lands. Their appetites and attitude would prove disastrous to the embryonic vegetation and, while these new lands were lush, they lacked in game. Adjusting their nomadic lifestyle to these new circumstances, a tribe would move into untouched land, drain it from all consumable resources, then move to another; and if that happened to be occupied, then war was the answer.

It is possible that eventually these tribes could have adapted further, possibly finding a balance with their surroundings, moving with the different seasons, and learning to allow the land to rest before returning to it. They were never given that opportunity.

When the Ukunfazane came to the new lands, she made the warring tribes an offer: learn to work the land or perish. Her travels among the humans had taught her the basics of agriculture and she offered this knowledge readily to those who were willing to listen. "Land-taming" they called it and its knowledge was given to the Bound, expanding their influence over the tribe and elevating their elder to a seat in the all-Tribe Councils. This shifting in power, however, was not taken kindly by all Chieftains. While most tribes accepted this new blessing by their goddess, there were those who resisted, continuing their nomadic wars, and raiding the settlers for their resources. The names of those chieftains have been forgotten and their tribes are collectively remembered today as the Poloatti Tribes – those who have been erased.

For the rest, however, life would change. Slowly but steadily, a new way of life would be developed – one that understood the value of settling, curating the soil, domesticating, and

breeding animals for food. Soil filled with biomantic nutrients from the Spire oases would be brought to the new settlements in exchange for skins, plumes and meat from animals bred there. In time, rather than raiding and plundering, trading would become the dominant way of exchanging resources between the tribes. It was the beginning of a new way of life for the W'adrhŭn, one that promised the birth of a civilization which would rival those beyond the Wastelands. A civilization, however, that was doomed to die soon after its very inception.

To this day, few among the W'adrhŭn suspect why this dream had been allowed to bloom. Fewer still know for a fact that the strife and conflicts among the Anointed and the Fallen Pantheon moved in cycles and this brief period of prosperity simply coincided with yet another civil war among the ranks of the unGod's servants. But once a semblance of balance had been achieved in Capitas once more, dead, coveting eyes would turn east once more, drawn by the opulent vibrance of life and the power of a Fallen Divinity would come to claim the land.

It began subtly. Crops that had every reason to be bountiful would start yielding less than expected. Animals would refuse to mate as often and stillborn cases became increasingly frequent among both the W'adrhŭn and their domesticated beasts. With time, things turned to worse. Entire fields withered and died for no discernible reason. Animals, especially young ones, died without an apparent cause. No signs of disease could be found among either the flora or the fauna; it was simply as if life was slipping away from them. Then, a hunting party that had ventured into the valley of the Great Turtle never returned. The search party that went looking for them shared the same fate. Only part of the warband that followed came back and they brought simple news: the dead had circled the Lost Oasis beyond the mountains. And they were coming.

The war that followed was intense and gave birth to many tales of heroism and victory for the W'adrhŭn. But it was ultimately futile. It would not be long until it became apparent that the land could no longer support the settlements and the war was being fought for dead land. The tribes would once more pack their things and forge caravans, returning to the Wastelands and the harsh nomadic life of their ancestors. Quietly, softly, the W'adrhŭn dream of a new way of life would wither and fade with the crops and animals that had inspired it. Unlike them, however, this dream would never truly die. Remembered in songs and tales exchanged around the fires during the cold, wasteland nights, the roaming tribes would remember the time when they tamed the hardest beast, the land itself; the time when the fields would stretch lush, green and colorful around them.

To this day, the memory of the Lost Land lingers among the W'adrhŭn – as does the memory of the foe that stole them. There could never be peace between the living and the dead; but even if it could, the W'adrhŭn would not accept it.

Huenantli – The Old Mother Oasis: The W'adrhŭn civilization is by and large painfully disillusioned in their beliefs. Their living goddess is no illusive divinity but a living and breathing ruler who walks among them. The origin of their people is not shrouded in mystery, nor is the

purpose of their existence the fuel for never-ending philosophical or religious debates, but rather the subject of both private and public discussions. Their certainties in life have been an immense influence on their civilization and its pragmatic approach to life.

That, however, does not strip their every day lives from dosages of mysticism and superstitions. As a young civilization, still taking uncertain steps and in many ways forced into maturity by the Ukunfazane, the W'adrhŭn revel in their ritualism and perhaps the greatest proof to that is their approach to their grand oases and especially the Huenantli.

The very name Åsiss'ti Huenantli – the Oasis of the Old Mother – can serve as a good indication about the W'adrhŭn mentality and poetic nature. Forged by the remnants of the Abhoreth Spire – birthplace of their people – and the cornucopia of raw materials and specimens trapped in its bowels, Huenantli is believed to be the first Oasis to be settled by the W'adrhŭn. Facing extinction in the barren Wastelands during the years that followed the Cataclysm of the Fall, it is said that the few handfuls of survivors screamed the name "Huenantli!" when they laid their exhausted eyes on its blooming paradise for the first time. While the Ukunfazane tried to nip – or even cull – such venerations in the bud, in her later absence the name was remembered and established in the minds of its denizens.

While the discovery of the Oasis spelled salvation in the desperate eyes of the W'adrhŭn, the first few years of settling it were anything but peaceful or prosperous. Spire creations and even survivors of the Battle of the Bloody Dawn had claimed the untamed jungle, lighting the fuse for an explosive war for territory. Under the leadership of the Ukunfazane, the W'adrhŭn would show no quarter; beast, clone and monster would fall under their primitive weapons and ruthless efficiency – but it did not happen either fast or without losses. Prioritizing the preservation of her limited population, the Ukunfazane would move as carefully as she did unyieldingly. By the end of the first year, the W'adrhŭn had claimed significant water supplies in the outer rings of the oasis and had established outposts and raised watchtower platforms on the tallest trees. For the better part of the next three years, they would concentrate on replenishing their numbers, their food and water supplies guaranteed by dangerous hunts in the deeper parts of the oasis, while their warriors trained by performing expeditions against monsters and exile creations alike. Those years would mark the birth of the Hunter caste, as well as the foundations of the Bound system; survival demanded the attention of the Ukufazane more than it treasured individuality. Once these basic principles were established in a primitive and simplified form compared to what is applied today, only then did the Ukunfazane muster her warriors and launched her campaign to conquer the core of the oasis.

It would take her two years to clear the oasis enough for the W'adrhŭn to truly call it their own, to the extent that they would, although it would take more than twice that time for the broken shell of ancient Abhoreth to come under their control. Even then – and largely to this day still – its bowels remained unexplored and untouched. This was due to three reasons: first, the root system of a Spire, especially an old one such as Abhoreth had been before its fall, can be immense, the Underspire anything short of a metropolis in its own right. Second, the bowels of

a Spire, living or dead, can be extremely dangerous places, even to the hardest of warriors. Whatever abominations and monstrosities the Spires safekeep in the root system of the Spires remained untouched, their vats unleashing them without warning at irregular and unpredictable times. What's more, the careful balance of its delicate ecosystem, largely reliant on highly toxic fumes and corrosive liquids, crumbles without the careful maintenance of its Pheromantic keepers, making the tunnels a living hell to most living organisms.

Last, but in no way least, even if they had decided to brave the dangers of the broken Underspire, the W'adrhŭn were – and to this day still are – loathe to tamper with the unpredictable ecosystem forged by the broken Abhoreth. Whatever powers and materials had been unleashed by the Spire's fall had fueled the precious paradise of the oasis and if meddling with it could spell its destruction or decline, the W'adrhŭn were unwilling to test it. Legends and tales about the Darkbowel run rampart to this day; a Fifth god awaits sleeping, an entire society of Clones still live in it, the secret to immortality for the W'adrhŭn awaits within, taken from them by their Spire creators… Those are but a few examples but the any W'adrhŭn better think twice or thrice before trying to test their validity. To this day, venturing beyond the few opened tunnels and halls of the Underspire is a crime punishable by death and all cave-ins and entrances discovered are guarded. If that means that the denizens of Huenantli have to live with the echoes of shrieks, chitters and growls from the bowels of the earth, then so be it.

In the absence of the Ukunfazane after her departure, the Oasis quickly deteriorated into an arena for a bloody free-for-all between the different settlements, as Tribe divisions were carved and chieftains were raised left and right. Many tales claim that all that is savage and bloody in W'adrhŭn society stems from these years of their Goddess' absence. The tales have some merit, as practices such as the mandatory Bound servitude of conquered tribes, for instance, were born during that time. But the truth is that the Ukunfazane never abolished them, despite the centuries of W'adrhŭn generations that have passed since then.

Many Tribes were forced to leave the abundance of the Huenantli during those years. Some would become the first roaming Tribes that learned to live off the Wastelands. Others would eventually find the other Oases, and the circle of blood and battle would begin anew there. Others still, however, were lost forever, each loss a blow to a new people that struggled to find its place in the world. Despite its bloody past, Huenantli today is perhaps the most prosperous oasis, a regular haven for the Ukunfazane herself – and the most endangered settlement of the W'adrhŭn. Too close for comfort to the rising threat of the Old Dominion, Matriarch Indilla of the Ozomatli finds herself under cold and unfamiliar shadows. As close to a political leader as the W'adrhŭn can produce, many fear that Indilla is ill-equipped to counter the existential threat that the Old Dominion poses. She disagrees. Ready to delegate when she must, Indilla has already sent one of the Oasis' best predators to scout the movements of the dead, while her Braves and beasts prepare for the worst, guided by their leaders. She has also decreed that all Tribes of Huenantli are responsible for their territories but that they each must sent one warrior for every four they have to serve in a rapid response army, which will serve to enhance the

defenses of any Tribe of the Oasis under threat. While the order was ill-received, it has been followed; time will only show if it will prove enough or if the Queen will take further steps to ensure the survival of the W'adrhŭn's ancestral home.

Tale of the Flying Hummingbird: People in the Hundred Kingdoms are beginning to learn the name Nagral of the Coati and rumors about the sudden appearance of the W'adrhŭn barbarians in their lands have spread faster than the name of the man responsible. It is, perhaps, a testament to the seclusion offered by the Claustrine that the tale the tribespeople know is the exact opposite. While the fate of their kinsmen that crossed the Gates remain a mystery to them, the tale of how one W'adrhŭn led them there is common knowledge, recounted now by the Cult of Famine as the "Tale of the Flying Hummingbird."

Nagral of the Coati was born under the stars of the wastelands. Son of Neagi of the Coati and It'teekal of the Raptor's Fang, his mother's pregnancy was painful from early on, so much so that it was thought he would turn out to be a Warbred. When it became apparent that this was not the case, he would be nicknamed 'Warling,' a moniker that would follow him throughout his life among his tribe. Neagi herself never called him that, however. "It is a great spirit I give a body to," she always said, "not a cursed one that will break mine."

Indeed, growing up, Nagral was neither the strongest nor the fastest of the Coati youths and his fate, it was thought, would be to be Bound to the tribe. Stubborn as a lazy Thunderbeast, the young Nagral detested the finality of such talk. At first, he would spend hours in the empty wastelands, far from the camp, trying to hone his listening. If he were to become a Speaker, he would not be Bound. But when it became apparent that he did not have the gift, he turned to a harder path. When his fellows would play, he would train, trying to build his muscles. When they sat to rest, he would stand, trying to increase his stamina. At nights, he would try and creep around the watches, aiming at stealing their weapons before he was seen. The thrashings he earned taught him hard lessons about stealth and hunting. Every year he would watch the Trials, observing and learning from the victors, while his fellows cheered and celebrated. Only when the Cult of Famine shared stories, would he be still, sitting quietly and absorbing the history of his people. In the end, although he was not disliked by his peers, his habits would often isolate him and in many ways Nagral had a self-imposed, lonely childhood. Lonely but not unwatched.

Finally, the year of his Trial came but Nagral never had the opportunity to test himself. When his name was called, Scion Aekundur raised his hand: "The Ukunfazane claims this one," he said. With these five words, Nagral's future had been decided on and he had been called by the Cult of Conquest. It was an exceedingly rare practice of a right, for the Cult usually chose its members, if any, among the victors. To be chosen before that, was one of the highest honors to both an individual and to their tribe, for it meant that one's worth had been witnessed and recognized already and the tribe had raised an exceptional individual. But while the gathered Coati cheered and yelled his name, the young W'adrhŭn pleaded to be allowed to test himself regardless. "A man should taste the fruit of his labors, be it sweet or bitter," he said but the

Scion smiled. “Chew, son of Neagi, and chew for years to come. The skin and flesh of this fruit is bitter; but once you suckle on the seed, you will know what sweetness means.” And bitter it would prove indeed, for the neophytes of the Ukunfazane had to study in all positions of W’adrhŭn society for a year. For the next year of his life, Nagral of the Coati would meet the future he had spent his life trying to escape from: he was Bound to his father’s tribe.

As was the intention behind the practice, the next years would offer Nagral unparalleled insight into the society of the W’adrhŭn. Like any of the Chosen of Conquest, Nagral would learn to secure food with the Bound; he would train with the Braves, learn how to throw with the Hunters and to care for beasts with the Speakers. By his own admission, his favorite year would be with the Cult of Famine. For an entire year, Nagral would listen and learn about the stories of his people, his own tribe, and others and even of the Ukunfazane. With each of his apprenticeships, Nagral would come to truly know his people, their practices, the different mentality between different groups and tribes. And in the end, he would be introduced to the goddess, the Ukunfazane. Within a year, he was sworn as her Chosen and he never returned to his tribe, as was the custom. The year after that, he was named her consort.

By the age of twenty, his name was all but unused; Nagral of the Coati was a name remembered only by those few whom he had befriended in his travels. For the rest, he was *Huitzilin*, Conquest’s Hummingbird, consort of the Ukunfazane, her aide, her messenger, and an instrument of her will. He roamed the tribes with his goddess or in her name, helping her shape their people, dispense justice when needed and bring peace when necessary. The sweetness that his Scion had once promised, he tasted every day… but, some claim, he never forgot the bitterness.

Not even the Cult of Famine knows the tale of what exactly made him leave his goddess or, if they do, they did not share it around the fires and neither did Nagral. Some say it was simply time; unlike the King Consorts of old, the Huitzilin was not a life-long position, nor did they share her power and burdens. It was only natural that he would be returned to serve his tribe eventually. Others claim that he saw an injustice that the goddess was not willing to address; that while some tribes thrived in the oases, others struggled with starvation and extinction in the barren landscapes of the Wasteland, living as thieves and raiders. Others still would claim that he remains her instrument; that it was the will of the goddess that led him to his path. Regardless of the true reason and circumstances, two things are known: Huitzilin and the Ukunfazane argued repeatedly, or at least Huitzilin argued while the goddess listened. And then, one day, he returned to his tribe and was Nagral of the Coati once more; or so he claimed, for the Ukunfazane never replaced him and no other had been named Huitzilin in his place.

But Nagral of the Coati did not settle in his new life. Soon, he would speak to his Council, urging them to think of both past and future. Their tribe had lived like nomads for generations. Where once the Coati had settled on rich soil, now they walked on rotten feet and the land had died anew. With the Oases long settled, no room was left for his displaced people and the Coati had not been the only ones to have had suffered such a fate. Tuskbow, Peccari, Broken Jaw, Red

Hummingbirds, Pale Owls… they all had been forced to abandon the fertile lands left behind by the ashen rain of the Fall and roam in the wastelands. But the dead were now coming, and those lands were long gone.

But there were other lands, green and fertile, beyond the Mountains in the west…

Once he was back in the Wastelands, Nagral did not delay taking action and he visited the other nomadic tribes one by one. His message was simple: *Enough*. Enough warding off the dead. Enough living on scraps and enough infighting. While the oases' tribes thrived under roofs of trees and warmth, the nomads struggled to make a living with the lean offerings of the Wasteland and the cold nights under starlit skies. All of them once wielded the knowledge of land-taming and that knowledge, he knew, had not been lost. It was preserved by the Cult of Famine, in stories, in songs and in records. All they needed was a land to tame. That land lay beyond the Wall of Mountains.

Nagral's task was not easy. Many were the voices that spoke hesitantly in answer to his call. Predators feared for their beasts in the lands beyond the mountains, Mistresses doubted the future of their Bound and their influence should the lifestyle and needs of tribes change, while Chieftains raised suspicious eyebrows, for Nagral already spoke as a leader of warriors, despite belonging to another tribe. But the ghostly mantle of Huitzilin was still loosely wrapped around his shoulders. His words carried weight and the Scions and Shamans remained supportively silent.

Nagral answered with deeds to the doubts and cautious whispers, undergoing the Trials of every tribe he visited. Thus, he declared himself a warrior of each tribe, rather than his own alone, binding his fate to theirs. It was, in many ways, a purely symbolic move but not one without significance. After all, the Ukunfazane herself was leader of every tribe. With the Huitzilin binding himself in this manner to them as well, the nomadic tribes were now tied by a bond which, while neither unbreakable nor guaranteeing peace, spoke of a shared destiny. This, many believed, was not really enough and it is a known fact that Nagral spoke in private with many a Council Member that needed convincing. What these discussions entailed, few, if any, know. The more suspicious ones spoke of secret deals, coercion or promises, while others believed he simply relayed the Ukunfazane's will openly to them. Judging by the way he handled matters, one thing is perhaps more plausible, at least for most cases, for Nagral, in practice, addressed the greatest fear of many. This did not mean a unification of tribes but an alliance. Everyone would share knowledge and traditions to ensure the success of the migration, but each tribe would be governed by itself. Nagral would negotiate with the land-chieftains of humans for the tribes and for that he needed a strong, unified front behind him. Beyond that, however, each tribe's fate would be its own with one exception: should the Deal of the Ukunfazane with the humans be invoked, each tribe would send warriors under Nagral to fight the dead once more.

One by one, the votes of the tribe Councils started moving in his favor. First to declare they would follow him and the Coati were the Red Hummingbirds, renowned for their craftsmanship

and the strong traditions that favored the Cult of War. Nagral put them to work immediately. For such a migration, weapons would be needed and new tools and new carriages and wheels, ones better suited for the lands beyond the mountains. Then came the Peccari, whose beasts were famed for their numbers and prowess. From their Speakers, Nagral asked for new harnesses for the beasts, tasking them also to train the other tribes when needed, on how to best employ their own beasts for the migration. The last followed soon, the Tuskbow, the Broken Jaw and the Pale Owls, and as always Nagral urged them to share their knowledge in one area, be it war or craftsmanship or how to fight death and disease. Already, some complained that Nagral was trying to slowly unify the tribes under him but the Huitzilin's purpose was different. For the first time in generations, the nomadic tribes were forced to trade once more, a skill Nagral believed would be necessary when sharing the lands of humans.

While in theory his plan was a good one, tensions rose fast as soon as the tribes started gathering. Brawls and even skirmishes broke out throughout the giant camp only days after its foundation, thus endangering the entire enterprise just as it had begun. Only then did the Cult of Conquest speak to Nagral, and the Scion of every tribe met with him in council. No member of the Famine Cult was present to put into song and tale what had been said but all of them spun a tale for what followed. Without saying a word, without blowing his horn or ordering for the drums to beat, Nagral left the council of Scions and started walking West. Alone and uncelebrated, without a herald or an escort, Nagral of the Coati put the sun on his back and began walking towards the mountains in the horizon. And for a few short moments, the Huitzilin's plan seemed to have failed just when it had been born in earnest.

The first horn to blow was that of the Coati and soon after the sounds of brawls died out, hesitant, as the engaged braves looked around confused. Then the cry of the Pale Owls echoed, followed by the roar of the Peccari's Apex. Soon, the drums of six tribes of W'adrhŭn beat to give pace, as their people and beasts followed Nagral, carrying their livelihoods with them.

They would not stop until they had reached the Claustrine Gates. And then they would pass them.

Building a Civilization: It is often believed that the greatest challenge that W'adrhŭn ever faced was the Fall; stranded under cold and darkness, while ashes of anything green still settled around them, it is hard to imagine surviving the scarred Wastelands as they did at the time. And yet, survive they did, and while the Fall certainly exacted a heavy toll, the fledgling people would endure and find, eventually, the Huenantli oasis. Their true challenge, some Cultists of Famine sign, would still lie ahead and yet it was in their darkest of hours that the foundations of their thriving culture would be laid.

Warriors without peer from their very inception, the W'adrhŭn would soon adapt to their new environment, becoming adept hunters, hunting down the monstrosities that would plague them and making the oasis safer for their population. It was during this period that the W'adrhŭn discovered the Speakers among their own population. With their help, some of the creatures of

the oases would slowly be shaped into cautious companions and beasts of burden. What is more, their goddess would have them forge a proper, unified form of communication for her people, uniquely adapted to their physiology. Equipped with weapons other than the ones they held and with the oases providing enough resources to secure at least the survival of their small numbers, the fledgling race could look forward to understanding and evolving in the world around it rather than simply surviving in it.

Primal engineering and material management began, and the foundations of the true settlements were laid. For the first time, rather than efforts being concentrated on the preservation of the population, numbers grew. Thinking her people were safe and the times ahead prosperous, the Ukunfazane sought to explore the world to find what other threats and opportunities existed. She left her people and put her progeny in charge of steering and protecting the population in her absence. But the very inexperience and naivety she sought to address through her travels, would cost her people in her absence.

The relative safety the small population enjoyed during that time would soon prove fragile. As the population expanded, the demands placed on the nascent W’adrhŭn society by their own dietary requirements and the incredibly hostile nature of their environment, slowly forced them to adopt a mentality of ruthless pragmatism. The strong were revered and the weak were abandoned, and while their numbers still grew, hope slowly vanished behind a façade of barbarism justified by necessity.

Division was inevitable as different groups would gather round or be forced to follow stronger individuals that were capable of securing food. These chieftains, who would raise banners and fights between them, were ruthless and brutal, carving deep lines between the different groups until, as generations passed, these groups and banners would give birth to the concept of tribes. Many of them, usually the weakest, were driven to the outskirts of the oasis, forced to scrape a living from whatever they could steal. Some fled the oasis entirely, knowing nothing of the world beyond. The luckiest among them would find other oases spawned by the rest of the fallen Spires. Others would learn to survive from the meek offerings of the Wasteland, occasionally raiding the richer tribes, only to flee to the wastelands once more. Some, however, would be lost forever, their names, banners and chieftains forgotten because of their weakness.

Upon her return, the goddess looked upon her people and despaired. Trapped in her prolonged lifespan, she realized that for her short-lived people, decades had been enough to reduce them to violence and brutality once more, driven by circumstance and the unfettered influence of the Primes in their blood alike. She had traveled the world, beheld the ruined marvels of the Old Dominion and the arcing technological majesty of the City States. She had traveled through the teeming populations of the kingdoms, discovered writing, literature, drama, music — only to return and find her people circling in a dark pit of barbarism and cruelty.

Seeing no other solution, she personally took control of the tribes, slaying countless would-be claimants and challengers. While even-tempered and gracious to those who capitulated, she

had no compunction in extinguishing those tribes she saw as too far gone. She waded into the fight for the soul of the W'adrhŭn race itself, embracing her divinity as a tool to force the tribes to adapt to a new way of doing things.

And yet, for all its wonder and majesty, the world she had met in her travels was neither a peaceful nor a safe place. Her people had ventured down a path she had never wished for them — this much was true — one she thought that would have proven their ultimate destruction, had they been allowed to walk to its end. Yet in their division and warmongering, her people had remained industrious and the Ukunfazane was not one to disregard what she saw as gifts, if properly controlled. What lessons they had learned harshly, about survival, about fighting, about the dangers of the oases and the scarce gifts of the wastelands, the goddess would adopt and ensure their knowledge was passed down from one generation to the next. During her absence, the Speakers, once tools for the advancement and security of the forming civilization, had weaponized their gift and, with it, their beasts; this, she knew, would prove to be an asset to her people. The division into tribes offered versatility and their clashes would keep them well trained and experienced, without posing a civilization-ending threat. They had even expanded their territory, discovering new oases, new beasts, new tools for the entire people to use.

Despite the adoration she enjoyed, her work was neither easy nor fast — not for her people anyway. She taught a new language for everyday use, one influenced by the ones used by humans, and through it she promoted storytelling and singing, while the mystifying language and primal chants the Speakers had developed were turned into tools of war, to ensure communication in battle. Violent and primitive customs such as binding enemies into servitude to provide food for the tribe would be turned into the practice of the Bound; she would channel and shackle the violent practices of individuals strongly influenced by the strands of her dead siblings onto rituals and traditions that offered them purpose. Only this time, the short-life span of her worshippers would prove a boon to her. It took little more than a century for the Ukunfazane to change the very foundation of the civilization of the tribes. Since then, the W'adrhŭn have expanded and even prospered where none other dared to venture. The oases became permanent, almost peaceful settlements large enough to resemble proper towns, led by a defined hierarchy with specific succession rules. Tribes outside the oases led, perhaps, a harsher life; their strength, however, would remain such that new settlements would be founded in the once ash-covered, then rich and bountiful fields of the Old Dominion. While in time these were abandoned and those tribes were forced into a nomadic lifestyle once more, the lifestyle, peace, and prosperity they had offered were kept alive through tribal storytelling tradition, providing for a new drive, new aspirations, and new ways of life for the tribes. During the centuries that followed, the W'adrhŭn society as we know it today was shaped, based on distinct roles, practices, and groups of influence, forming a civilization with goals, aspirations, and a vision for the future.

The Sky Farms: The W'adrhŭn, due to their unique physiology, require near constant sustenance, with both established and roaming tribes being deeply dependent on the great

oases for the procurement of their ever important nutritional hoards. For as long as the dead of the Old Dominion remained an elusive, scattered threat, this – often violent – balance was working, ensuring the survival of the W'adrhŭn. But after the forced abandonment of the Lost Lands, the Ukunfazane realized the inevitable – and unaccountable – calamity that would descend onto her people from the east. And to this, she spotted a threat beyond the violence of war: food shortages.

Losing a single oasis, even for a short period of time, would strain her people, possibly beyond their limit. Thus, she devised a twofold plan; on one hand, she would… nudge her Hummingbird, Nagral, towards leading many of the roaming tribes beyond the Gate. This way, not only did she ensure the continuation of the W'adrhŭn people, while preparing the ground for the rest of her people to follow if needed, but also reduced the population that relied on the oases for sustenance. The second part of her plan was less deceitful though no less impactful: to begin weaning her people from the oases they had called home for so long, the Ukunfazane envisioned an agricultural undertaking of mountainous proportions.

Immediately after Nagral's departure, the goddess ordered for the construction of multifaceted terrace farms upon the eastern slopes of the Claustrine Mountains – beginning from the base of the mountain-range and expanding upwards near its frigid peaks. Bound laborers would arrive at the mountains en masse, accompanied by veteran Speakers and monstrous beasts of burden, birthing the Ukunfazane's vision into reality.

Thus, the rocky dermis of the clustered mountains has begun being molded and hewed into ascending terraces – packed with layers of gravel, porous stone, and fertile soil to create a patchwork of alpine farms. To populate such unique plots, the hardiest of vegetation and greenery were selected – carefully picked from the W'adrhŭn's oasis-bound homes for their nutritional value and shared ability to persist through adversity. Such crops prominently included jade corn – whose starch-abundant kernels are akin to bone in hardness – and death's head tubers, whose vile-tasting roots can derive nutrition from the most inhospitable of soils. To feed this manufactured cornucopia, the Ukunfazane has ordered for the carving of an expansive web of irrigation channels, drawing precious water – from the cavernous glacial lakes dotting the very top of the Claustrine Mountains – and distributing it amongst the segmented slopes of the farmlands below.

While a good portion of the crop yields are ferried back to the oasis homes of the W'adrhŭn – hauled atop monstrous, scale-covered beasts that form sprawling caravans – a sizeable portion is instead stored at the base of the mountain-range. Inside immense silos of compacted earth and stone, the living goddess is hoarding precious stores of life-giving sustenance – for she knows that her people will need it for the challenges that lie ahead.

Vigilant within their sky-bound holds – that are strewn across the crest of the Claustrine Mountains – the Order of the Sealed Temple have become aware of the W'adrhŭn's agricultural machinations on the eastern side of the mountains. Fear is beginning to bubble across the order

and the strength of old compacts is being questioned – as the threat of a W'adrhŭn migratory deluge into the Hundred Kingdoms is inching ever closer.

Ulakbaat and the Legend of the Eclipse: After the foundation of Huenantli, some of the roaming tribes that were forced to abandon the safety of the Mother Oasis, ventured beyond the known lands of the time. Upon reaching the far north of the Wastelands, they came across a vast oasis near the end of the expansive desert; in the middle of the great jungle stood a titanic Spire, which was guarded by an immense beast: Kugur. Kugurr is said to be the largest Apex to ever tread upon Eä, being so large that she was said to blot out the sun when she strode into battle. Although Kugurr's origins and subsequent deeds are submerged within the realm of myth, W'adrhŭn retellings of her legend claim that she arose deep from within the bowels of the Lithodea Spire, which once stood at the site of today's Ulakbaat.

It is said that Kugurr slept deeply during the night, sliding into the caverns underneath the ruined Spire. But come morning, her heavy footsteps would cause the oasis to tremble, as she came out to hunt. The colossal predator would not limit herself to feasting on flesh and blood, but began to consume the very oasis itself – devouring large swathes of jungle with each passing day and threatening to unmake the verdant haven entirely. As the cold night gave way to dreaded daytime, the Eclipse gorged itself endlessly, growing ever larger with each cycle.

Desperate and exhausted, the tribes that had migrated to the oasis which surrounded Lithodea found refuge on the edge of the oasis, living in constant fear, not only because the titanic Apex would hunt down and devour anything that she came across, but because day by day, the refuge of the oasis was diminishing. Despite the best efforts of the W'adrhŭn Speakers, Kugurr could not be reasoned with; the great Apex was driven by an all-encompassing, unnatural hunger and nothing else, leaving no room for logic and distinct thoughts.

All hope seemed lost until two twins – Ulaku and Ulaka – decided to thwart the great beast. The siblings, one male and one female, were young and yet tremendously blessed with both razor-sharp wit and unyielding bravery. For the first portion of the plan, the nimble Ulaka slathered herself in liberal amounts of fat and ventured underneath the ruined Spire and into the realm of the Pungaweredi – more commonly known as Carchantulas, outside the W'adrhŭn tongue. The Carchantulas – communal arachnids of truly alarming size that live within Lithodea's underbelly – had established a fearful alliance with the mighty Kugurr, offering the great predator food, which was caught from their webs, and acting as her lackeys. Reaching the center of the Carchantula subterranean hunting grounds, Ulaka was able to avoid capture due to her greasy, slippery form – gliding and navigating the expansive spiderweb network without an issue in sight.

At the heart of the immense web, the Speaker Ulaka sought to coax the Carchantula Elder Queen out of hiding, tugging on the delicate strands of spider-silk like a harpist might the strings of his instrument. Expecting to feast on entangled prey, the Queen chittered and crawled, heaving her immense bulk to meet the disturbance head-on. Being blind – as is the case with all

Carchantulas – Ulaka was able to escape the Queen's eager fangs, leading her through and around her own web in a pointless chase. The Queen roared and cursed, demanding to know the infiltrator's true identity. Ulaka, smart as she was, stated that she was an agent of Kugurr – lying that she was sent to test the Queen's prowess in catching and providing prey for the great Apex. Ulaka expanded her lie, saying that the Eclipse believed the Queen to be incapable of catching victims, having lost her edge due to old age. Furious and desperate to prove the accusations wrong, the Queen paused and started producing webbing of exceptional quality, weaving spider-silk of the purest form in the hope of subduing the intruder and demonstrating her worth. Before she was able to cast her net, Ulaka retrieved a vial of Dilosaur poison from her pouch – which is known for its unparallel pain-inducing properties – and flicked it into the spider's exposed web glands. The beast, now in a fit of unimaginable pain, was sent reeling back – discarding her silk and fleeing deeper into her domain to shelter her wounds. Ulaka was quick to retrieve the discarded silk, coiling it around her shoulders and making her way towards the surface and to her brother. Due to this act of trickery, it is said all Carchantulas remain forever hostile to this very day – harboring a seething hatred for all W'adrhŭn because of Ulaka's actions all those years ago.

Upon reaching her brother within the oasis above, Ulaka handed him the precious bundle of spider-silk. Under the vigil of a full moon, Ulaku weaved a veil of unmatched craftsmanship – letting it cure underneath the night sky and imbuing it with shimmering moonlight. Without pause – during the same night, when the Great Apex was sleeping – the twins ventured once again beneath the ruined Spire, following the path towards Kugurr's lair. There, the twins found the Eclipse amidst a deep slumber; with one swift motion, the spider-silk veil was draped over Kugurr's head, pushing the great Apex into an eternal night and never-ending sleep. The veil's moonlit properties – the story goes – have kept Kugurr subdued ever since, binding the legendary beast into an ever-flowing dream that has no end in sight. In honor of the mythical twins, the northernmost oasis was named Ulakbaat – meaning Ulak's Guile – by the grateful tribes. Yet, legends say that Kugurr might still awaken, rising from deep within the earth, so that she might devour all in her path once more.

Despite the myth of Kugurr's saga, the tale of Ulakbaat's founding serves a key practical role within tribal society. The labors of the two twins show the value of wit and calculated guile to young W'adrhŭn, highlighting that force is not always the most preferable solution. The tale of the Eclipse's downfall showcases the power that lies within inventive thought, fostering that very spirit within the impressionable minds of the young.

Today, Ulakbaat is mostly known for its harvesting of Carchantula spider-silk, with trained poachers collecting the valuable material by targeting and incapacitating the great spiders – much like Ulaka did within the famous tale. The silk has a multitude of useful properties: the organic gel that coats it has notable adhesive and waterproofing properties, and the fibers are immensely tough and flexible, finding extensive use within an array of tribal crafts and disciplines. Additionally, the Cult of Famine has found a specialized use for spider-silk – when it

comes to the spread and recording of their many stories. Famine cultists have been known to weave intricate bundles made from the sturdy webbing, creating an assortment of knots within each strand to synthesize a specialized textile form of record keeping. With the additional use of targeted pigmentation, this 'silk-writing' – known as Quopiti in the tribal tongue – can be used to reliably record and propagate the many stories of the W'adrhŭn race between oases and tribes alike, making it of invaluable cultural importance.

The Living World of Zenduali of the Manucode: Entrusted with protecting the oases from the threats of the East, Zenduali decided to lead a fast and agile force into the lands of the dead men, scout their numbers, assess the danger and find out as much as she can about the enemy and area both. Her wishes for speed, however, were soon put to the test.

Plagued by still and silent dreams that smelled of death, her people found the fervor of life abandon them with every waking morning. Following the advice of the representatives of the Cults with her force, she ensured her people spend every waking moment busy and occupied by hunting, tracking and battle training, finding out all they could about the land. Her efforts seemed to work until one scout was left alone on a patrol, despite her orders for everyone to work in pairs at all times.

Riding fiercely into the camp, Raptor Rider Akeena reported directly to Zenduali that previous reports were confirmed and that large tracks had been found in areas long thought lifeless. Excited by the prospect of wildlife even in these parts, Zenduali's joy was quickly overshadowed by the notable absence of Akeena's scouting pair, Oatti. Furious that her orders were not followed, she nevertheless allowed the scout to rest for a spell, before she rode with her to find Oatti.

The ride proved harder than any before. Haunted by the elements themselves, as a sudden sandstorm befell them, Zenduali was entranced by a whispering voice in the wind. Mystified and consumed by its lure, she listened to its words and despaired, as a cloudless rain mingled with the besieging sandstorm. With the very land and elements around her feeling lifeless and angry, Zenduali plunged into misery, with young Akeena trying desperately to pull her out of her own mind. She only succeeded when the storm died out and Oatti was found, her throat sliced and her bloodied dagger in her hands.

Influenced by her experience in the storm and consumed by paranoia, she declared the death a murder and started frantically to try and track the culprit. Eventually, defeated by her own exhaustion and Akeena's desperate pleas, she accepted the death as suicide and returned with the body to the camp. There, the young scout was given a self-hands killer's funeral. Struggling still with the ghost of the despair and futility she experienced in the storm, Zenduali ordered that all works would be done in groups of four.

Once she had established there was nothing to track and next to nothing to hunt, Zenduali realized how much time she had lost trying to battle the land of the dead itself, and just how little she had learned about her enemies. Pushing on against her own, haunted mind, she

ordered multiple tracking groups of four and eight to scout deep into the Lost Lands and the lands of the dead, while she remained in camp to keep her force disciplined, as the rations were going dangerously low. Her patience was rewarded more than she wanted: not one but two forces of dead were spotted. One was engaged with her cousin, Yolmantok, who was forced to gather as many of the scouts as he could to confront them. The other was a larger force, settling and unearthing the ruins of an old city.

Sending word to the Oasis, Zenduali sent the main camp to meet with Yolmantok. Herself, however, gathered a small, agile force and went to observe the ruined city. There, she saw works of excavation being done. Moving stealthily, she observed numbers, watches and patterns but had no inkling as to their battle readiness and tactics. Having ensured that the oasis would be alerted first, she decided to follow the daring plan of one of her captains: a hit and run assault, aiming to gather as much information as possible about what the dead were digging for and how they responded to guerilla warfare.

The Battle of Divina Ruins proved to Zenduali that the dead would not be an easy enemy. While she was forced to retreat much sooner that she had hoped and before she managed to strike any significant blow, she did manage to observe that the dead seemed focused on uncovering tombs. She noted the speed and effectiveness with which they had responded to their surprise attack and the quiet coordination with which they moved. Equipped with some losses but armed with knowledge, Zenduali fled west, her mission only a partial success.

The Oasis of Omgorahuli: The middlemost oasis within the wastelands, Omgorahuli, sprouted from the ruins of the once great Myrias Spire, which came to be known as Ghan'ta by the W'adrhŭn – meaning Demon's Tongue in the tribal tongue. The oasis is known for its intense tropical climate; combined with the overbearing moisture, Omgorahuli's jungle backdrop clings to the skin and stifles the lungs of the unprepared. The plant-life of the region mirrors the chaotic and overwhelming nature of the environment: sprawling vines and protruding roots shroud the ground in its entirety, while the trees and bushes merge together to form near-impassable environmental partitions. Coupled with a plethora of buzzing insects, venomous serpents, and hungering jungle predators, and it becomes abundantly clear why Omgorahuli has garnered such infamy throughout the Wasteland – the potential ways one can die within the oasis are varied indeed.

The oasis' founding is closely tied to a W'adrhŭn tale of monumental significance: that of Omgorah the Unbound, the legendary raptor patriarch. When the Spire known as Abhoreth fell at the hands of the Dweghom, during the clash known as the Bloody Dawn, the nascent and newly freed W'adrhŭn were forced to flee and abandon the only home they had ever known. During those turbulent and uncertain times, the fledgling species – with their living goddess leading their emerging civilization – ventured north, into the chaos of the forming wastelands. Many were lost, at the time, but not all perished and, from those groups that were separated from the rest of their people, a small group came across an all too familiar sight within the

vastness of the Wasteland. That sight was none other than the Spire of Ghan'ta, which lorded over the forbidding horizon of the vast Claustrine Mountains.

The group's arrival was timely. Heavily damaged during the Exile Campaign of the Dweghom, the battered Spire never had a chance to be repaired by its masters; for from cracks caused by the Dweghom's siege, a terror had been unleashed within Myrias' bowels, wreaking death and havoc on the Exiles within. Now, mere hours after the W'adrhŭn had first laid eyes on the Spire, the Fall of Hazlia took place, plunging the sky in ash and darkness and shaking the entire world. Before their very eyes, the weakened Spire finally cracked, as powerful earthquakes shook its already crumbling structure – and from the steaming rubble the terror within immerged: Omgorah the Unbound, a raptor unlike any other, stood upon the ruins of the Spire and roared his defiance at the open world. The great raptor was a predatory juggernaut, driven into a frenzy that allowed him to feel no pain or fatigue as he hunted down his disoriented enemies, leading his pack against what few Exiles had survived their home's destruction. At the sight of such chaos, the W'adrhŭn left the fallen Spire to its fate, forging their destiny elsewhere within the Wasteland.

Years later, some of the tribes that were driven from the oasis of Huenantli, would return to the sight of Ghan'ta's fall, finding the lush tropical oasis that had formed around its colossal carcass. Ghan'ta was a young Spire, with ample reserves of life-giving substances and live biological specimens that were stored in its underbelly, releasing them upon its death and causing a deluge of new life to emerge in the surrounding area. Rulers of this new ecosystem was Omgorah and his brood, who nevertheless did not perceive the arriving W'adrhŭn as prey, allowing them to settle within the verdant expanse he called his lair. Seeing Omgorah as the one who brought down Ghan'ta and a protector of their kind, the tribes named the newly discovered oasis Omgorahuli, roughly meaning Omgorah's Rest, in honor of the raptor patriarch's mythical feat and legend says that it was the Unbound, a paragon of bestial lethality, that helped the tribal Speakers learn how to best communicate with his kind. While the Unbound eventually passed away and became the stuff of legends and tales shared by the Cult of Famine with all Tribes, his lineage survives into the present, consisting of genetically superior raptor mounts that are collectively known as the Brood of Omgorah – serving as exalted mounts that fight alongside the W'adrhŭn but remaining notoriously hard to control, save by the most accomplished Speakers.

While many of the tales of Omgorah the Unbound and the creation of Omgorahuli might not be entirely rooted in truth and facts, their symbolic meaning is still of great importance within W'adrhŭn culture, signifying perseverance and rebirth during chaotic and uncertain times. Today, the main city of Omgorahuli is located to the west of the oasis: it is built upon a great stretch of freshwater wetlands, supported by countless elevated wooden platforms that separate it from the murky waters below. Virtually none of the W'adrhŭn city is constructed atop solid land, for the surrounding jungle is too chaotic and dangerous to support such endeavors. Instead, the locals weave their urban tapestry atop Omgorahuli's marshlands –

having created a patchwork city, made of bound wood and reed roofs, that exists in harmony with its aquatic environment.

At the center of the oasis, one can find Ghan'ta's fibrous carcass; when the Spire's stem toppled over, it cracked open the very earth, creating a massive chasm that spans the entirety of the oasis' eastern side. The gigantic rift came to be known as Tun'tuki, meaning Evil Grin, and connected the Spire's underbelly with the surface. Geysers spew bubbling Spire-born discharge from within Ghan'ta's bowels, further enhancing the many Spire-created organisms that live near or inside the great chasm. Matriarch Myanmatu rules over Omgorahuli, acting as the oasis' sole leader and enforcing the Ukunfazane's will. The Matriarch Queen is said to have a striking passion for herbology, spending much of her time in an effort to catalogue and harness the power of Omgorahuli's miraculous plant-life.

Midwives of Life, Chosen of Death:

Midwives of Life, Chosen of Death

or The Final Misfortune of Duke Hemish of Bartenstein

The establishment of Chant'Atl, the first official W'adrhŭn settlement in the lands of the Kingdoms, was, by and large, a peaceful one; after the initial hostilities, that is, and the agreement that Nagral of the Coati made with King Brand of Rottdorf. Sanctioned by King Fredrik of Riismark, Chant'Atl was a thing many local lords despised but dared not oppose; but while the authority of Fredrik carried weight, it was not a gospel to be followed blindly. The truth of the matter was that few dared to challenge the W'adrhŭn. Their warriors looked fierce and powerful in the eyes of humans, and the novelty of their sudden appearance had even the hardiest, cruelest brigands stop in their tracks and abandon any plans of raiding. At least at first.

As time passed, and with Fredrik's and Brand's eyes fixed in Angengrad, things begun to change, especially after the bulk of the W'adrhŭn population left Chant'Atl, unable to be supported by local resources. Little by little, the imposing W'adrhŭn turned from an exotic, mighty presence, into the subjects of bigotry and envy, then into a source of speculation: what wonders could they be bringing from the lands of the Old Dominion? What treasures and relics of old could their huts and caverns hide, their barbaric idiocy too great to appreciate? It was not long before the W'adrhŭn of Chant'Atl met the uglier face of humanity, with raiders, emboldened patrols and even idiotic mobs harassing or openly attacking them. Their violent endings usually brought back peace for a time but only served to fuel more of the same later on. Then one attack changed everything.

Few ever understood why Duke Hemish of Bartenstein had his men attack Oyohua, the Den of the Death Cult in Riismark. Some claimed it was because Nagral of the Coati had ignored the Duke's offer to have the W'adrhŭn as his vassals, if they bend the knee to him. Others outrageously claimed he expected a child with one of the barbarians and wanted to erase his shame. Most, however, thought it was simply an easier target. Mirroring the Awlery of the

Wastelands, the den served as infirmary and birthing center for the Coati tribe, and was situated outside Chant'Atl, in the natural caves of the Shlegg Rocks, its entrance all but unseen from the main settlement and with no visible guards. It was a place of nurses and midwives. Who would defend them?

* * *

When the Duke's men made their way into the den's caverns under cover of night, they did so dressed as brigands and cutthroats. It was dark; darker than it had any right to be, but the cloud hung heavy and low, leaving no silver light of moon or starlight slip through. Captain Marder Zhein cursed as much as he was thankful for this. On one hand, it was the fourth time he had heard one of his men slipping on the rocky path and they risked being heard by any guards that could be waiting inside. On the other, he had seen against the glare of the torches of the settlement below the head of the long-neck beasts and he was in no rush to be seen from below. Cussing under his breath, then fixing uncomfortably the awkward barding brigands favored, he urged his men for stealth one more time, then went on. Only a few dozen steps remained until the cave entrance. Unlit, save by the gentle light of lanterns, rather than the glaring light of torches, the mouth of the cave cautioned in silent warning, as they drew closer and closer. Distant screams echoed in his ears, and at first, he thought he was imagined it, a sign that they should turn back. Every step he kept taking forward revealed the truth; a woman was giving birth, somewhere deep inside the den. With a gulp, he muttered a prayer between his teeth, exhaled, and turned to give the order. Five faces he could barely see watched him back and he could read in their expression how they shared his superstitions. Two dozen more were following, some tens of meters behind. Steeling himself, he motioned for them to move. One by one, they rushed stealthily inside with surer footing, guided now by the light of the lanterns.

The cave was small and empty, save for the lanterns and some barbaric totems made elegantly of reeds, roots and leaves. Some men warned off evil as the Deists do and Marder growled at them to be professional. Scanning the empty room, he saw the tunnel leading further in, the same small lanterns guiding there as well. With a motion, he led the way; but not for long.

Three dozens steps; that how deep down the tunnel they walked before it turned and opened into a second cavern. The screams of the mother-to-be from deeper still came clear now, but it did not have a chance to unnerve the humans further. The female figure before them, standing with but strands of wool and straps of leather to cover her decency, managed that before anything else. She stood alone as if waiting, hands clasped behind her back. Her hair, caught in tight braids adorned with bone, feathers and strings, passed through a bone headpiece, a skull perhaps from one of their beasts. She seemed to look at them passively almost, as if she stood miles away from them rather than a few paces, but her eyes were covered under a ribbon of cloth.

"Away," she said. Calm was her voice; no. Cold, it was. Not calm. "Who brings Death in Death's hold is Death's to claim."

One of his men laughed. He didn't. He just ordered them to charge. One of them draw a sword and did.

Blades flashed in each hand of the woman, assuming a combat pose before the man had reached her. She pushed aside the larger blade easily with the left hand and, in the same motion, one unbefitting a blindfolded woman, she danced around the man, her right hand turning to stab with her back turned at her victim. Before they had a chance to gawk, she was on to the rest of them, killing one by driving one blade up his chin, then shoving him to an ax bearer behind him to gain time. Their training kicking in, the rest would not go without a fight. One swung for her head from the side, and she twisted and bent backwards towards him, slicing with both blades and spilling his guts, while allowing his swing to force a second attacker to stay back. Crimson now marring her face and torso, she got up, driving one blade to a third attacker and using it as leverage, only to block a club from the second man with the other. The parry shook her, and she faltered, forcing her to put a leg back to maintain her posture and regain her composure. She was not given much time. Marder was on her, timing his attacks with the man with the club. She parried and evaded, dancing and twisting around them to keep them between her and the man with the ax, who had pushed her second victim off him and was coming at her. Shocked but trying to keep his composure, Marde screamed for the rest of the men outside the cave to hurry in. It was the last thing he did, her blade piercing his throat through. The last thing he saw was a second figure towering over him, and a third next to her. From afar, he heard his reinforcements screaming a charge and a woman yelling above them, as she was bringing new life to the world.

Time passed. Like a gaping mouth, the entrance to Oyohua was silent once more, whispering only the distant screams of a newborn. Then three women came out, adorned in the crimson of those who would defile their domain.

"We have a name?" one asked. Another nodded.

Few ever understood why Duke Hemish of Bartenstein had his men attack Oyohua, the Den of the Death Cult in Riismark. Many, however, knew the tales of his fortune after that.

7. City States

Introduction

While the Hundred Kingdoms were being born in a wave of desperate refugees, violence and hunger, the City States were flourishing, picking through the greatest secrets of the old Dominion and delving into the secrets of archemy and divinity. Today they are the greatest repositories of knowledge and the inheritors of the glory that was once the Old Dominion of Man.

At least that is what the Locutors of the City States would have one believe. It is true that while the Hundred Kingdoms were born from the desperate rush of thousands of refugees, the City

States had already been founded on the highest principles of philosophy, ethics and education available to mankind. In fact, the entire existence of the City States is owed to the presence of their founder, Constantius Domulexor.

Born Platon of Chorae, he started as a humble butcher's apprentice, only to rise to the pinnacle of secular power within the Old Dominion, becoming the *Maistros* of the Dominion's *Collegia* under the academic name of Constantius Domulexor. It was Constantius and his colleague, the unnamed First Magos of the Collegia, who identified Hazlia's creeping madness. They, two of the most powerful and influential individuals within the Dominion, delved deep into the secrets of divinity and the Primordial, plumbing secrets on the nature of divinity and power that have thankfully been lost. Both individuals were deeply changed by their research and while the First Magos sought to use his knowledge and power to kill his God, Constantius resolved instead to safeguard and protect mankind from the coming cataclysm as best he could. Using once more the forgotten name of his humble origins to ensure secrecy in the first stages of his schemes, Platon took on a subtle task of momentous proportions: the transfer of an empire's amassed knowledge.

Thus the foundations of the City States were laid. Craftsmen, scholars and workers were secretly encouraged to emigrate even as the libraries of the Old Dominion were copied and sent with them. As the collapse of the old Dominion accelerated, even the thinnest pretenses of secrecy were abandoned. Entire libraries were ransacked and countless legion reinforcements were diverted to serve as guardians for the burgeoning cities. Even some of the Bred were saved from the great purges that followed, becoming productive members of the growing City States.

Platon's intimate knowledge of the workings of divinity even allowed him to send a Primordial seed to each of his cities which would with worship and belief, grow to become patron Gods to each city, protecting them from Hazlia's baleful influence and unknowingly laying the foundations for the single greatest technological advance of man: the science of archemy.

To ensure the success of his vision, he dared what no mortal before him had attempted and stole a small but critical portion of Hazlia's mantle to keep the fallen god from turning it on mankind. Worried that he might eventually succumb to the same fate as his God, Platon sought to divide and contain this gift, placing himself at the heart of every City that was founded in his vision.

So it was that with a healthy population, a dedicated corps of Guardians, a benevolent patron god, the accumulated knowledge of mankind, and himself as an incorruptible philosopher king guiding them, it was Platon's dream that each of these cities would become a utopia from which man could reclaim the planet. But so worried had Platon become of the Divine pitfalls and the corruptive nature of the power he knew he would wield that he fell for an even more timeless foe: hubris.

While the scientific principles behind his efforts may have been sound his time was running out so his process was rushed and his vessels flawed. The transference was incomplete and the

cities were left to their own devices, ruled by pale shadows of what Platon had hoped would be divine philosopher kings advised by an incorruptible council. Impaired by their own deficiencies and scarred by the terror he felt in his final moments as his science and technology turned against him, the ruling councils of each City ruled as best they could, but to no avail.

Within decades, little unity remained amongst the City States. Fed by the burgeoning paranoia of the Councils, all efforts were bent to securing the future and prosperity of the City against a divine foe that had already been defeated rather than focusing on safeguarding mankind as a whole. Resources were hoarded and relations between the cities soured quickly.

Fearful of upsetting the status quo, the Councils proscribed almost all growth and development but what they could control and almost overnight archemy and clockwork became the driving force of industry within the City States. With no overarching will to guide them, they soon became independent City States, each warring with the other to maintain what dominance and resources they could secure.

After decades of repression and warfare, it should come as little surprise that almost half the city states rebelled against their own councils, particularly among those cities where the damage from the failed transference was the greatest. Some of these rebellious cities imploded spectacularly, their citizens fleeing north to the Hundred Kingdoms or finding refuge in other, more successful, City States. Those Cities that endured fall within two broad categories: those that fell under the sway of demagogues and the plague of democracy and those that fell under the iron fisted control of their patron gods unleashed.

Today, that is how the City States stand: split among the Demagogue, Militarist and Academic Councils, squandering their glorious heritage and advanced technology challenging each other and any who might threaten them for supremacy.

The Scholae: One has but to catch a glimpse of Pallas, crown jewel of the City States, to understand the awesome power that the Scholae wield. Its towering white walls gird the city like the arms of a lover as the gold cupolas of its trading houses shine day and night under the glow of the flaring phlogiston stacks that rise through the city like the dreams of a maddened genius. Crowning this vision and rising from the center of the city in a vision of white and gold, lit by the lurid lights of its own accomplishment, is the Acropolis upon which rests the Lyceum, seat of all power in the City State and beyond.

Pallas is the city around which all City States have been modeled, a shining beacon to the potential of mankind and the vision of its founder, Platon. Unfortunately, despite his best efforts, Pallas remains a rare jewel amongst the City States, true to the vision and principles to which it was founded while other cities have strayed. Some, like Helias or Rhodea have merely lost focus, but others like Acheron or Leutria have completely abandoned the Scholae and their gifts and embraced the power of the gods and masses, respectively. And at the heart of this Schism lies the mad ambition of their founder and his hubris.

When Constantius Domulexor envisioned his dream of a mankind free of the yoke of worship, he knew well that one could not forge this dream overnight, nor perfectly. No matter his efforts, time and human nature itself would conspire to rob mankind of its own future.

Now it must be understood that, aside from the Anathematic, no other human had grasped the secrets and nature of primordial power than Constantius Domulexor. It was in fact he who coined the three principles of power that have formed the bedrock of modern primordial studies: that power corrupts, that belief is power, and that power calls power. Hurling himself into his project and studies, Domulexor worked like a man possessed. The more he understood of the twisted mind of his God and grasped the full breadth of his plans, the more horrified he became by what he witnessed. Domulexor saw that his original plan lacked the depth of conviction and scope necessary to survive Hazlia's attention should the Anathematic fail at his deicide. His plans had to be changed, and changed radically, to ensure no menace like that ever rose again.

His efforts, the true depth and breadth of which are hidden from almost all mortal eyes but those of his *Scholiasts*, lacked the decades of planning and breadth of resources he had once enjoyed. With the majority of his wealth and influence tied up in the foundations of the city states and the incipient collapse of the Old Dominion, Domulexor was forced to undertake his most daring and dangerous project.

Delving deep into the secrets of divine power and its primordial origins, he sought to become a god who could not be corrupted by power, whether his own or his followers'. This would require that he became a weak divinity, though one that remained powerful enough to usurp his patronage of craftsmen and scholars from Hazlia – a task that he calculated would be easier now, given that Hazlia had long since abandoned those aspects to focus on his role as Lightbringer and Pantokrator.

Pressed for time, he struck upon a desperate plan. Taking on the persona of Platon, he stepped forth from his role as *Maistros* of the *Collegia* and became the patron of the City States. Venerated, but not outright worshiped in this role, he would gain the trickle of power he needed to start his plans. What unspeakable experiments, moral concessions and mental trauma he underwent can only be speculated, for all knowledge of what he did in order to succeed at his task was wiped clean.

But succeed he did. The only cost being his humanity and sanity.

Not only did he usurp the portfolio he needed from Hazlia, but further sundered his consciousness into a host of vessels, coldly reasoning that as a council he would be harder to corrupt and be afforded a better chance of spotting his own corruption. Thus was the *Scholae* born.

For years, even decades, this plan worked. The *Scholae* used the knowledge Platon had discovered and their newfound divine mantle to guide the City States into a golden age of

discovery and prosperity. The City States thrived under the controlled supervision of the patron gods they installed. Their mere presence siphoning away the corrupting power of worship from him and safely drained to create Phlogiston, the incredible energy source he used to power the awesome machinery that the City States had developed under his guidance. In time the *Scholae* replicated itself, a copy of it having been installed in the Lyceum of every City State.

In time though, the price paid for his divinity and haste with which he moved came back to haunt him. His traumatized mind should never have been invested into new vessels, especially ones chosen for their availability rather than their compatibility. Madness slowly seeped into the councils, and with it, chaos. Contradicting orders, abandoned projects and the inhuman expectations of his followers mounted on each other. This process was particularly pronounced in those city states that had received a second generation *Scholae*, as the recompilation made the errors more pronounced.

Madness and paranoia crept into the halls of the Lyceum, with facets of the *Scholae* suspecting each other of corruption and turning on each other. With each death, the *Scholae* fragmented further, losing critical knowledge and information required to continue running the city. It took only a few short decades for chaos to overwhelm most of the City States.

In some, namely Leutria, Eubron and Laurion, the mobs broke into the Lyceum and, horrified by what they encountered, purged the Acropolis, and established fledgling democracies that sought to fully integrate every member of the cities' society into governance. These cities even opened their doors to the few Bred refugees and slaves that had managed to escape the fall of the Old Dominion, granting them equal rights and a voice in the governance of the city, in principle at least.

In others, the rising frustrations of the populace turned to prayer and the weakened *Scholae* were unable to contain the nascent power of the patron gods. In Acheron, Tauria and Lycaon, the patron gods, awakened from their slumber to witness the truth of their own incarceration and exploitation, these nascent gods stopped only to slaughter their captors before taking command of their Cities. These cities thrive under the power and watchful gaze of their gods. With every facet of life closely aligned with the gods' visions, their grace and blessings flow freely, but dissent is ruthlessly suppressed.

Only Helias, Rhodea and Pallas managed to avoid this fate. Here the *Scholae* managed to fend off the incipient madness, quarantining and sectioning off those segments of themselves that had become corrupted, staving off the growing madness. In Rhodea this manifests in the grandiose megalomania of the cities' projects and workshops while Helias' fixation on development and wealth have driven it to heartless extremes. Today only Pallas stands as a beacon to the vision of what the City States were meant to be.

The Populist States: While the history of the Transcendent States dominates bardic epics and the imagery of Pallas has inspired an entire School of Art in Galania, it is the political system of the Populist Cities that has served as inspiration for endless conversations. From radical groups

in shady inns to philosophical youths of the nobility in the comfort of their soirees, the idea of a society where the individual is valued enough to contribute to a State's policies has intrigued thinkers far beyond the borders of the City States.

Most look at this unprecedented concept at face value; these societies have embraced all within their walls, presenting a seemingly seamless coexistence which promotes discussion, cooperation and constant societal evolution. And indeed, visitors would be quick to notice the citizens of such a State walking freely and equal in its streets. They would see them gathering in the *Agora*, where the *Ekklisia* of citizens would discuss and decide on the fate of its own city, from simple matters like the restoration of streets or the erection of new statues to enhance the city's splendor, to big works like the expansion of the walls or the declaration of war. Human and Bred, be they Satyrs, Fauns, Minotaurs or Centaurs, make up their state's mind, even as they listen to its voice; a collective society but one which also never loses sight of each and every person in its ranks. It is a perfect union of individuals embodied by its marble statue with a firm fist made of different fingers; one which rushes with passion and force to meet its destiny and crash its enemies.

But should one look closer at this perfect image, one would notice the cracks in this marble statue's face; for States with a unified voice, the Demagogue Cities are in their core more divided than most. It would be a philosophical debate in itself to pinpoint the source of this division; its agents are apparent. Deprived of the contingencies Platon's overseeing philosopher-kings would offer, the procedures of the *Ekklisiae* would soon inspire aggressively ambitious individuals and opportunists with a talent for persuasion. In time, the claim to electoral offices would become a profession in itself, one whose success depended on an inspired and loyal following that would readily support one's views. In a society with obvious divisions in creeds and races, the avenue to success was not hard to detect.

During those philosophical discussions in lands far beyond, there is always one who rushes to remind the rest of the sad truth: much like the rest of Platon's experiment, these City States have failed, subject to the predations of demagogues that seek to capitalize on their systemic flaws. One could indeed see free citizens shout their prices with gusto from behind stands and shops with anything from silk and spices to fresh fish and vegetables that they have gathered by hand. They would perhaps also notice how a human would scarcely look at the Bred seller and vice versa, or how one would openly scorn those who support opponents in the *Ekklisia.*

The scars on the society of Demagogue Cities extend far beyond the obvious and the ferocity of division is perhaps even harsher between the Bred and the humans themselves. Calling a Satyr a "Faun" even by accident could very well result in one's body to be found among the morning's catch. Doing the opposite could spawn a grudge that would never be forgotten and would potentially be repaid with great imagination and far beyond the limitations of mere insult, no matter how grave. The degrading names that humans use for different types of Bred (calling a Minotaur a cow is a favorite, even if rarely in one's presence) have not only been adopted as insults by the Bred but embraced with gusto. While perhaps less obvious, the divisions among

humans are no less vicious. When listened to with care, those inspiring discussions in the *Agora* are rarely much more than venomous rumors and veiled, or not-so-veiled insults that rarely have anything to do with the matter to be decided. The ideal of logic and the prevailing structured argument has long been abandoned and the *Ekklisiae* have become glorified slandering platforms. Trade wars have been declared on purely political grounds, that have financially crippled entire families.

When such tactics prove to be insufficient, violent clashes, coups and tyrants are ready to appear when offered enough support, only to be overthrown, sooner rather than later. This process has been repeated so many times and with such consistency that Vomophonos, in his comedy "Theemos", would have its protagonist be asked "Τύραννον εἶχες;" ("Did you have a tyrant?") when he claims he comes from a populist state, as if this would verify his claim. Apart from dry humor, however, there were much more lasting repercussions.

Coups and tyrants would often find support among the oppressed Bred, who would in turn see their rights suffering further when populism would be restored. What's more, the law often foresees that one's family will be held accountable for one's transgressions, having failed to produce a worthy, lawful citizen. Voting rights will be revoked for a generation or more, either completely or for some types of votes, until eventually, some citizens will be ever so slightly less equal than the rest. Most Bred and some human families today are allowed to vote only on specific matters of lesser importance, while only few could run for office, even if they thought they did stand a chance to win. More often than not, these join the military, whose regular rank-and-file soldiers lack many voting rights anyway but have a guaranteed salary and place in society. In the end, that too serves the demagogues that saw them in that position at the first place; the might of the City is a favorite subject of the *Ekklisia*.

The damage to Platon's idea of a unified society was not done overnight and in many ways that is where its "success" lies. Little by little, the differences, not only those physically apparent, but also in views, opinions and ideas would be marked with lines that would only deepen with each generation. Yet somehow, despite these adversities, or perhaps because of them, these Cities have no less strength and majesty to present. Even if constructed to satisfy a successful demagogue's ego, impressive walls and giant statues have been erected, while entire fleets have been forged and Bred-enhanced armies have been kept in excellent condition to inspire one's fearful supporters. What if those walls are named after them, if the statues depict the megalomania of some or if the names of the fleet's ships carry the names of individuals that did more harm than good? The strength and might they both project are real, and the forces that can be fielded can wreak havoc. And the moment a demagogue seeks to create enemies beyond the city's walls, this strength will prove just how real they are.

The Religious States: It is a testament to the scope and depth of Platon's design that, in many ways, the easiest part of his plan was the forging of gods out of the primordial shards he had secured for each City. The people of the Old Dominion, after all, had been shaped by a

theocracy, their everyday life dominated by a religious culture, forged by a mosaic of multiple tribes and peoples, as well as an expansive pantheon. Stripped from its idealistic endgame of a perfect society, Platon's enterprise was a true scientific miracle that saw gods created by the design of a mortal, an unparalleled success of human ingenuity.

The shackles that contained these new gods, each further restricted in the confines of worship and influence of their respective City States, were indeed placed ingeniously. But the strength and endurance of their manacles relied on the creation of an ideal society where great philosopher kings ruled in harmony and wisdom. With that part of the plan in shambles, the chains of these deities would weaken, and cracks would prevail upon their gilded prisons; their limitations would suffer and the thirst for absolute freedom would slowly consume them. In most cases, this would fuel an unending power struggle between them and the City's Scholae, academics and demagogues. But in some Cities the patron deities would expand their influence and purpose far beyond those of their intended roles.

In Milios – by far the strongest naval power of the City States and a dominant force even beyond the *pelaga* of the Cities – while the goddess Athrastia does not dominate the everyday life and politics of her city, many see her influence behind the city's admirals, who worship her as a fickle and vengeful mistress that mirrors their seas. But it is perhaps no coincidence that those deities that have far expanded on their intended roles were originally designed as a triumvirate of military command, there to ensure the safety of the City States. Whether because of the abundance of worshippers that their military societies offered, their very nature or chance, three gods above all else would come to dominate their Cities' life and cultures.

In Tauria, Minos would be venerated with gusto, his double-edged axe adorning the shields of his warriors and his horns dominating his colorful city's landscape. Celebrated by his people for his disposition, ever willing to break his own rules, but also feared for his stern judgment and even vengeful wrath, Minos is perhaps viewed as a Warrior King, one who makes allowances readily but whose mood-swings can be unpredictable once an unseen line is crossed. His critics often dismiss him as reckless, petty, and self-indulgent but an observant scholar would perhaps hesitate before adopting such views. Minos' warriors are some of the best in the City States. For all the feasts and colorful celebrations, Tauria remains a heavily militarized and structured society. His warriors have defended their patron's influence and lands from other City States, often through displays of power that one could portrait as unnecessary, petty or vengeful. Yet, the Warrior Bull has rarely turned his aggressive attention towards the City States unless provoked, some claim unwilling to risk disrupting the balances that still ensure the partial success of Platon's plan. Tauria's forces have instead ever looked to expand towards the Allerian Plains. Multiple campaigns and wars against the Telian Empire, or the Hundred Kingdoms later, have been waged, that, through both victory and defeat, have inspired timeless epics of legendary warriors, massive battles and heroic deaths.

Minos' stricter and more ruthless counterpart reigns in Lycaon, where Aecos would ensure the city's name would become a synonym for strength, cunning and ruthlessness. His efforts to

break free of his shackles are as relentless and single-minded as they are calculative and patient. It is perhaps a blessing that Aecos's limitations remain seemingly stronger than Minos's but the deity is nothing if not a cunning commander. It is no coincidence that no city and few towns or settlements exist near his, and the entire *Lycopaethion,* the Valley of the Wolf, is riddled with ghost towns and abandoned ruins of temples to other deities. If directly challenged through force, the challenge is answered with spear and sword, quickly and efficiently, and it is said that even the Nords have learned tales of ruthless warriors with Lycaon's initial on their shields. Still, Aecos understands that it is preferable to convert than to kill would-be followers and that the way to freedom is not a battle but a campaign. Where circumstances allowed, rather than eradicating a settlement, crops have been destroyed, land salted and animals stolen or killed, the missions often used as training for child cadets. In time, the would-be settlers would either leave or try their luck in the existing towns or the city. If they did not come to worship him, then their children or their children's children would. Ever few of words and despising fanfare, Aecos would see Lycaon become a symbol of military strength that the entire world would come to know.

Last of the intended triumvirate was Radamanthos, patron of Acheron. Unlike his counterparts, Radamanthos was intended as a thinker and a strategist, not a mighty warrior or commander. Baptized as he was with one of the many names that once belonged to the Seer, the deity was soon venerated as a judge of the dead, and the god readily adopted the mantle, with eyes sternly turned to the rising threat in the East. It is perhaps for this reason that he approached both Minos and Lycaon, trying to ensure that all three fulfilled their intended roles as a triumvirate. And it is perhaps for the same reason that the two rejected his offer.

Afraid of the possibility of his own corruption without his counterparts and terribly aware of his duty as the first defense against Hazlia's influence, Radamanthos turned to his worshippers. Choosing two, he attempted to replicate Platon's experiment and to elevate two mortals by his side; Triptolemos in the place of Minos and Demophon in the place of Aecos. It is unknown precisely to what extent his endeavor was successful, or how effective his effort to counter his corruption has been. Under the three deities, however, Acheron has successfully endured and even prospered in the shadow and under the constant threat of the Old Dominion and the Tribes of the W'adrhûn. And yet whispers and shadows in the city seem alive of late. At the feet of Radamanthos's giant statue that stares ever to the east, where Triptolemos and Demophon reside, a new inscription has appeared: "*Θνητός γεγονώς άνθρωπε, μη φρόνει μέγα*": you were born mortal, Human, do not think too highly of yourself. While some see this as a wise caution from their gods, to remain humble and respectful, reminding them of the dangers of hubris, others fear both its origin and its true meaning.

With a careful selection by Platon, of names, iconography and symbolism, all familiar from the endless, vague and intricate scriptures of the Dominion, the transference of belief came to his designed deities almost naturally. Acheron's seasons today are riddled with Mysteries, sacred days, rituals and celebrations to strengthen the triumvirate. Lesser or greater aspects that Hazlia

had assimilated from his own Pantheon were once more redirected into these shards, depriving the Pantokrator of small but vital portions of the power and dominion he was possessing at the peak of his power. Shackled by the contingencies built in the process and method of their very creation, these new gods would wound Hazlia's all-powerful eminence, while avoiding the dangers of corruption. But with those shackles gone, one can't but wonder where the unintended expansion of these deities will lead.

Spotlight

Myths and Reality: Considering the youth of the City States civilization, the number of myths and legends that permeate their culture is staggering. In a scant few hundred years, an elaborate mosaic of heroes, monsters and deities have established themselves in the minds of the population, to the point where few everyday discussions do not include some form of reference to persons and places that may or may not have existed. Unparalleled art has been sculpted, painted and created to depict entirely or almost entirely fictional characters and scenes, while poetry, epics and theaters around the Cities retell the stories at an almost daily basis. The natural question one could feel inclined to ask is simple.

Why?

Are the people of the Cities so much more inclined to myths? Do they suffer from a mysterious mass affliction that sees the most scientifically ground-breaking human civilization turn to fables? Considering the origin of their civilization, the scientific minds that mold so many aspects of its society and especially their founder, who had meticulously planned each detail of their existence, one would expect a level-headed society that put reason before fantasy and history before myths; and yet at first glance, the City States present a collection of tales that seemingly dwarfs those of the Kingdoms and rivals the likes of the Nords. The answer to the question is not straightforward and the reasons can only be theorized in their multitude.

It would, for instance, readily claimed that the question is without merit, as the phenomenon under discussion is non-existent. The City States do not in any quantifiable measure have "more" myths than the Hundred Kingdoms or the Nords. In fact, quite the opposite is true: the amassed collection of mythologies stemming from the various cultures of the Kingdoms far outweigh that of the City States, while the far older traditions of the Nords would drawn in their plethora the tales of City bards. The illusion of the opposite stems from cultural differences or their lack thereof. Unlike the Hundred Kingdoms, the culture of the City States is more cohesive, its structure far more similar in its core than it is different. By and large, the people of different Cities are divided by dialects, rather than entirely different languages, and their histories have more in common than they have different. This allowed for an accumulation of mythologies, of sorts, under a façade of unity – and indeed, in time, such a unity did begin to take shape, as the language allowed for the tales to be readily exchanged, the themes to be repeated and refitted until an almost united mythology was forged; while in the case of the Kingdoms there is an assortment of different mythologies that in order to spread, had to be reshaped beyond

recognition or live on in an echo chamber of the same group that birthed them. At the same time, unlike the Nords who rely on their oral traditions, the love for theater and the widespread use of the written word, allowed for an almost scientific approach to any mythos, as tales were meticulously recorded, repeated and perfected, being elevated from simple fables to educational and philosophical tales, which aim to explore human nature and, thus, resonating with the same strength throughout the generations. Should one take a closer look at these tales, however, the difference in details and in delivery of the same myth from City to City will reveal the truth behind this false single, united mythology.

This theory can be challenged by another view. While not dismissing any of its arguments, one could note that all the aforementioned factors which compounded to the phenomenon should, in fact, be viewed as tools rather than natural or accidental occurrences. Recognizing the immense challenge of detaching his people from millennia of their respective cultural histories, both of the overwhelming cultural influence of Hazlia's theocracy but also from the different tribal groups within the Dominion, Platon must have realized that a cohesive culture would be paramount to the success of his vision, lest divisions of the past resurface without the presence of an all-powerful patron deity to limit them. And yet, as such a deity was exactly what Platon sought to avoid to recreate, *something* had to take its place, in order for the population of the different Cities to feel connected but distinct – much like their deities. Perhaps among the many lessons he learned from his own god's history, Platon understood that an elaborate but united mythology allowed for different people to feel connected and part of a whole, despite their differences, while at the same time no single aspect of that mythos would dominate the spiritual landscape. This Under this light, his insistence to educate the population, his goal to promote theater to the point where they were incorporated to the very image of a good citizen, becomes less of an enlightened path and more of a planned route. Of course, none can say with certainty if such explanations are true or not. If any of the City Gods or the Scholae are privy to the inner workings of their founder's mind, their lips remain hermetically sealed on such matters. In the end, the answer could be simple; like many if not most myths of their cultural counterparts on the continent, there is actual truth behind the fantasy. Events that were exaggerated as the time passed and people that were elevated based on a single moment of glory. After all, there is no shortage of such tales on Eä.

Lycaon – Realm of the Wolf God: Amongst the remnants of Platon's vision of an enlightened, elevated society – free of the constraints of rudderless worship and unchained militaristic aggression – one city state stands out for its inherent ruthlessness in both war and faith. Lycaon, home to warriors of immense skill and renown, is a city that has strayed away from the light of the Scholae and Platon's original design. Instead, it's citizens focus on perfecting their battle-prowess and ability to persevere against all odds – doing so under the multifaceted tutelage of their patron god, Aecos.

Aecos is the wolf god of survival – claiming Lycaon as his realm and its citizens as his litter. Originally caged by the city state's now defunct Scholae, Aecos was able to partially escape

when the prayers of his followers reached their pinnacle, drawing power from their faith and gnawing on the chains that contained him. With a portion of his power freed, the wolf god disposed of his former captors and established the city as his domain – cementing a state of divine governance. Only partially unfettered, Aecos now seeks to fully escape the constraints devised for him by the slain Lycaon Scholae – aiming to one day release the full breadth of his power onto the world.

The wolf god values and blesses those with the will and skill to survive above all else – welcoming all that can endure and persevere when faced with intense hardship. He is known to have three aspects – assuming the form of each one in a calculated fashion: the Guardian, the Scavenger, and the Hunter. The ever-shifting faces of Aecos often make him an unpredictable deity; the faithful of Lycaon know that the whims of their god are beyond mortal understanding, and they view such fluctuations as divine wisdom.

When assuming the role of the guardian, Aecos becomes characteristically esoteric, guiding his worshipers to focus on their own city's affairs. During the guardian state, Lycaon resents most interactions with foreign powers, directing their resources to the development of their own city and related infrastructures. Buildings are erected, crops are harvested, and life prospers in relative harmony – for the standards of war-hardened Lycaon at least – and the wolf god seeks to protect and develop his realm with near parental devotion.

While assuming the role of the Scavenger, Aecos reaches a state of targeted absence – roaming beyond his realm more freely. When not absent – as the wolf god tends to disappear, satisfying his own hidden desires, during this phase – Aecos commands his followers to take all they can in the name of survival. As a result, the warriors of Lycaon venture beyond the borders of their city in larger numbers than usual – scavenging, pillaging, raiding, and auctioning their military services to those with the wealth to afford them. When the Scavenger shows his face, Lycaon is expected to provide for itself beyond already claimed resources, for survival requires to take what's needed through any means necessary.

The aspects of the Guardian and the Scavenger are the two facades Aecos adopts most often, sometimes alternating in swift succession. The third and final aspect is the rarest, showing its fangs upon a sole occasion – war. When the Hunter emerges, the warriors of Lycaon march as a unified spearhead – conducting wars with scalpel-like precision. Unlike the Scavenger – who casts a wide net and takes whatever he can, from whomever shows weakness – the Hunter focuses on a single target, using warfare as a tool to achieve goals that would benefit his realm. The armies of Lycaon are molded into a highly effective force when engaging in large-scale conflicts, using varied and devastating combat doctrines to break and defeat their enemies. Such tactics revolve around psychological, maneuver, and guerrilla warfare – chipping away at hostile defenses before delivering the final blow.

It is theorized by some scholars – outside of Lycaon's theocratic vigil – that Aecos' aspects are but a manifestation of the prayers of his faithful. During certain periods and events, the favor of

the masses is known to shift from one godly façade to another – often resulting in a corresponding change from the wolf god soon after. Additionally, there are some within Lycaon's society that choose to constantly venerate a single aspect of their deity – stemming off their personal preferences and desires. Whether the whims and prayers of mortals truly effect the wolf god's transformation remains unconfirmed, nonetheless.

All citizens of Lycaon are highly trained warriors – putting to shame numerous professional soldiers from other cultures. To become a citizen and be inducted into the city state's societal structure, one must go through the Trial of Aecos. This sacred test of tenacity and perseverance is open to all who inhabit the lands of Lycaon – the Lycopaethion, meaning the Valley of the Wolf. While all are welcome to take part in the test – including Bred, not just humans – it is usually preferred by the youthful, as one must endure extended physical and psychological hardships to succeed.

Those members of Lycaon that choose not to partake in this critical test of tenacity are required to provide sound reasoning, which is subsequently judged by the priesthood of Aecos. If the argument for abstention is found to be valid, the individual is exempted from the trial process. Circumstantial citizenship is granted – with such individuals being allocated to perform tasks that best serve their city-state, while losing the right to participate in Lycaon's war councils. Those with lacking reasons for nonparticipation are banished to the northern portion of the Lycopaethion – simply known as the Lycan Wilds – and are declared as recreants.

The Lycopaethion is comprised of two distinct regions – Karpos in the south and the Lycan Wilds in the north – cleanly segmenting Lycaon's valley home. While the southern expanse of the great valley, Karpos, is filled with fertile farmland and is the spearhead of Lycaon's modest agricultural endeavors, the northern wildlands stand in stark opposition to their domesticated counterpart. The Lycan Wilds contain gnarled patches of thorny, fruitless vegetation; jagged, root-like rock formations, which make the terrain famously difficult to traverse; and a plethora of hostile wildlife, including roaming wolf-packs. It is to the north that those that have fallen from Aecos' favor are exiled, forming ramshackle communities and shantytowns throughout the hostile lands they are forced to inhabit. Many of these exiled communities are built upon the ruins of towns and temple-complexes from the Lycopaethion's past – once venerating deities other than Aecos, such structural remains serve as a grim reminder of those that overburdened the wolf god's patience. Consisting of criminals, traitors, heretics, and other such unwanted individuals, Lycaon's exiles harbor a deep-seeded hatred for all that are associated with Aecos – especially individuals that seek divine favor by participating in the sacred trials.

All aspirants, before their test commences, are stripped bare and subsequently given a simple wool tunic and a set of basic tools – including a small knife and a modest length of rope. Only then are the contenders released into the Lycan Wilds, being given a singular goal: survive an entire week within the wildlands. Thus, for an entire week, aspirants must sustain themselves on very little – relying on scant edible vegetation and limited quarry to satiate their hunger. Hunting in these lands is a difficult task in its own right, for there is an overabundance of

predators – with limited prey to go around in comparison. It is often the case that aspirants will find themselves to be hunted – in an unfortunate reversal of roles – pursued by snapping jaws and eager howls. Often enough, the pursuers will not be of a bestial nature – with other humans being all too willing to prey on the roaming trial hopefuls.

The banished denizens of the wilds will show feverish hostility towards the trial-takers – seeking to harm them at every opportunity as a heretical jab to the god that forsook them. Those permanently banished to the Lycan Wilds are infected with the Wolfpox: a debilitating disease that sprouts foul, pus-filled pustules across the bodies of the contaminated. Such a sickness cannot be contracted through conventional means, being reserved only for those that have attracted the wolf god's wrath – or so it is said by Aecos' followers. Those afflicted by the mystical ailment will not outright perish from it; instead, they will gradually go insane by the burning pain and unimaginable discomfort that sprouts from within their festering bodies. Such culminating agony bestows the branded exiles with unholy strength – their lunacy driving them to a killing frenzy when faced with those not burdened by the wolf god's curse.

Legends exist, tales told during moonlit nights, of aspirants that are driven mad by hunger and resort to feasting on the flesh of humans and Bred alike. These creatures – called lycanthropes within the local folklore – mutate to resemble a hybrid of man and wolf, ever-hungering for the flesh of their former peers. Most within the city states dismiss such accounts as superstitious drivel – gory tales meant to entrain and spook the uneducated. Others claim that the wolfish horrors are in fact real – though such statements have never been backed through first-hand sightings. Yet, within the recesses of city state scholarly discourse, an odd theory lingers: could these lycanthropes be the lost fourth race of Bred that were gifted by the Spires?

If an aspirant manages to complete the Trial of Aecos, that individual is gifted with a modest parcel of farmable land, a complete panoply, and a set of weapons. The life of a fully-fledged citizen is shaped by the whims of the wolf god – oath bound to march to war, when called to do so, and tending to his land when not required to don the mantle of the warrior.

When it comes to the earthly stewardship of Aecos' realm, two mortals have been chosen to rule on his behalf – acting under his divine tutelage. These are Deimos, the king of Lycaon, and Niki, the warrior queen of the city-state. Deimos is a shrewd demagogue and spymaster, controlling and supervising Lycaon's affairs from the shadows. The wolf king is rarely seen outside the walls of his palace – built upon the ruins of the city's former Scholae and housing Aecos' partially ruptured prison – operating instead through his extensive network of agents and infiltrators.

Niki, in stark contrast, is rarely seen within the city's boundaries, leading Lycaon's armies on the battlefield instead. The warrior queen, affectionally called the "Huntress" by her followers, is a peerless warrior and tactician. Her lithe yet densely muscled figure is a well-oiled machine, battling with poise and precision. The queen's mind is equally masterful – handling battlefield preparations, strategies, and war-time diplomacy with the skill of a seasoned artisan. Yet,

talented tacticians are not in short supply within the city states: what sets Niki apart is her ability to combine the roles of the diplomat and the general, seeking to disarm an enemy through negotiations before resorting to bloodshed. When not leading her armies at the forefront of a military campaign, the warrior queen prefers to supervise the many fortified camps that dot the borders of Lycaon – only returning to Lycaon to convene with her mate and co-ruler. The king and queen of the wolf god's chosen city have produced two offspring – a son and a daughter – yet neither is guaranteed to inherit their parents' throne. Aecos' himself chooses who rules under his grace, electing a new ruler whenever he deems necessary.

Aecos' favored city state seeks only to survive – persevering in a hostile world through steel, tenacity, and faith. Vigilant over his realm, the wolf god seeks to fully sever his leash – wishing to unearth the full extent of his power that the Scholae withheld from him.

The Port of Rhodea: The city state of Rhodea – located on the island of the same name, at the lower north-west quadrant of the City States Peninsula – is known for its masterful craftmanship and extensive industrial prowess. The massive harbour city endlessly reverberates with the droning of countless shipyards and the metallic clamouring of workshops and forges.

So impressive is the port of Rhodea – nestled within the oceanic passage known as the Gilded Horn – that it has been acknowledged throughout Eä as a peerless mechanical wonder. Such is the complexity of the port's combined constructs, that inventors, engineers, and craftsmen across the world travel to Rhodea en masse – seeking to gain knowledge through their educational pilgrimage.

Most of the major mechanical curiosities that populate the port are the product of a single, ingenious mind – that of the legendary Rhodean inventor, Ypatia. A key member of the Rhodea Scholae during her life – governing the city's ever powerful engineering guild – Ypatia forged the island city into the harbour bastion it is today, designing a slew of devastating defensive measures to protect her patron city.

The two most prominent of these inventions are the Great Chain of the Gilded Horn and the Colossus of Rhodea – both being the city state's premier safeguarding instruments against potential enemies.

The Great Chain occupies the entrance to the Gilded Horn and consists of two statues – one at each side of the Horn's entrance. The statues are carved in the likeness of Rhodea's twin gods – Isthmina, the goddess of invention, and Isthmios, the god of crafting – with each cradling immense heaps of coiled chain atop their raised arms. The main chain is made of an impossibly strong alloy and individual links are the size of a fully grown war-horse – from each central link hangs a descending mesh of smaller chains, creating a gargantuan metal partition when fully spread out.

Most of the time, the Great Chain remains dormant at the bottom of the ocean – dipping downwards from each enormous figure and lying atop a bed of tangled seaweed, sand, and salt-

bitten shipwrecks. Yet, when the horns of war sound across Rhodea, the chain bulwark is raised – hoisted by complex gear-driven mechanisms, housed within each statue, that tug and pull at the metallic shackles, erecting the entire structure.

To sail through the iron veil of the Great Chain is to invite death: larger vessels are unable to pass entirely, while smaller ships risk getting flayed by the lesser chain appendages.

The Colossus of Rhodea – perhaps the most famous of Ypatia's menagerie of inventions – is the city state's final and most effective deterrent towards an invasion. With a full height akin to a minor mountain, the golden giant is the main fixture of Rhodea's skyline. Atop its two outstretched hands is a device known as the Panoptes: a spherical assortment of hefty, finely tuned lenses that can harness sunlight – when the weather allows for as much – and redirect it as a beam of concentrated heat. The solar ray can singe away most material – being known to even melt metal at certain angles.

Such is the might of Rhodea's combined machine arsenal, that few dare to attack the port city directly. For those that do, their hubris continues to litter the murky expanses within the bowels of the sea.

Archeron: Acheron stands at the precipice of oblivion, being the first line of defense against the horrors that lurk beyond the eastern reaches of the City States Peninsula. The city itself emerges in a dense mesh of gritty, yellowed marble and weathered limestone, as Acheron's urban landscape is often bombarded by harsh sandstorms that arise from the Wastelands to the east. Although the traditional architecture of the region dictates the liberal use of white paint – mainly to combat the intense heat of the summer months – Acheron's structures have a characteristic patina to them. Every year, slews of laborers swarm the city with buckets of ivory paint at hand, applying rich lathers of white coating to all building surfaces that are touched by the sun; their efforts are destined to fade away when a wave of swirling sand descends upon the city, stripping away the paint and exposing the raw stone underneath. This cycle represents the mentality of Acheron's citizens: they are exposed to constant threats and hardships, yet they insist on persevering despite the odds.

The **Triptychon** acts as the central fixture of the city's landscape, consisting of a titanic statue of Radamanthos which houses a considerable temple complex within its bowels. The statue – facing towards the east to signify the god's vigilance against the W'adrhŭn and the Old Dominion – leads two others, each of flanking the central statue and facing east as well. The statue to the right represented Demophon and the one on the left is Triptolemos. The two flanking statues house lesser temples of their own, connecting to Radamanthos' main temple at his statue's base. Though Radamanthos' sculpture is in relatively pristine condition, the two lesser divine constructs have experienced a state of extended disrepair. The statues of Triptolemos and Demophon are worn down and crumbling, missing large chunks of stones in places and showing signs of unnatural corrosion. This massive, dominating edifice perfectly encapsulates the pathos and fading glory of Acheron, defiantly staring east even as the

relentless winds and pressure of its border existence continue to weather its once pristine fortifications.

The city is ruled by an iron-clad theocracy, with Radamanthos – an original divinity from the Old Dominion, the judge of the dead and Acheron's chief deity – acting as the pinnacle of leadership. Radamanthos remains a remarkably active and focused deity, the looming threat of his perennial nemesis in the Old Dominion a constant and relentless source of concern and focus. This effort comes at a tremendous cost for the deity, his power sapped by his continuous expenditure, reducing his divine might to a level almost close to that of a mortal. The secret behind the god's urgency and weakness lies in the two empty thrones that stand next to his in the central chamber. Radamanthos was never meant to be a deity. His role and focus were meant to be shared among his two partners, Triptolemos and Demophon, each wielding the power of a demigod at best. The Fall and ensuing battle cost him his two partners, and in truth, have mortally wounded the god.

With his attempts to replace the fallen members of his triumvirate by cooperating with deities from others states having failed, his desperation and the necessary martial character of the city have pushed the god onto an uncharacteristic path. Acheron's society is almost entirely militarized, each citizen soldier expected to serve for ten years in the military, though most opt for a life of service. While a significant number of these men are required to garrison its massive fortifications along the river Stegos and push back the encroaching W'adrhŭn tribes, the core of his forces is split among the Eastern and western flank. The forces of the Eastern flank focus almost exclusively on the Old Dominion, having reached a tentative truce with the local W'adrhŭn tribes. Their campaigns are few and far in between, but when locked in combat the battles are brutal and the losses severe. Few understand the true purpose of these campaigns, most citizens and followers believing the official line that they are preemptive campaigns against the gathering might of the Old Dominion. Only the *Moirarchs*, the priest-commanders of these isolated warbands know that the true focus of these battles is the recovery of relics of Triptolemos and Demophon in the hope that their power and mantle might be resurrected to bolster the city once more.

The western forces on the other hand serve an even more obscure purpose. As far as the world and most citizens of the City State are concerned, those forces sell their services as mercenaries to any and all who might meet their steep prices, providing the city state with an endless stream of income it uses to bolster its defenses, a relentless regime of almost constant warfare to hone its massive conscripted forces, no small amount of influence among its peers and one of the most developed web of contacts among the leaders and commanders of all mankind, from the steppes of the Rus and the fiefs of the Hundred Kingdoms to the mountain peaks of the Polmag Confederacy and the bustling sister capitals of the City States.

The truth is much grimmer: the *Moirarch's* of those forces, aware of their god's predicament, are looking for worthy candidates who might possess the strength of character and spirit to assume the mantles of Radamanthos' fellow deities. They rove the continent seeking worthy

commanders to serve in a lifetime of conflict, hoping that the grim toll of their life's work might reveal those extraordinary individuals who could be imbued with a portion of their City States might and ascend to aid their god in defense of their City State and mankind against the storm of undeath they know is coming.

Acheron has control of two fortress cities within its extended territory: Petrapolis and Rhamia. Petrapolis is positioned next to the dam that controls the flow of the river Stegos – potentially flooding the surrounding area to halt an encroaching army. Rhamia has used similar dam technology to push back the ocean in its vicinity giving it access to enormous manmade salt flats which constitute a large part of its trade. Few doubt that these flood gates and dams do not have measures in place that would also allow the waters to rise and wash away an invading force should the city be incapable of containing the threat.

The Inquisitors of the Scholae: There are few institutions more vested in the prosperity and survival of mankind than the Scholae of the City States. Their very creation arose from the self-sacrifice of one individual who beheld the horrors of divinity unchecked and sacrificed his very self to create an incorruptible entity that would stand against the horrors that plague mankind upon Ea. Today the scholae are at the gleaming forefront of mankind's future: the City States are gleaming bastions of industry and progress and their armies some of the most powerful and disciplined forces on the planet. But all of these actions are the efforts of their gleaming, open, and visible right hand. The Scholae have spent countless resources and plumbed well past all ethical and moral limits of research to create the Inquisitors, the Left Hand of the Scholae.

Crafted from the bodies of criminals and traitors, the bodies of each Inquisitor is bloated to monstrous proportion through the judicious application of smuggled Spire growth factors and live phlogiston, the expense of which alone would beggar some smaller kingdoms. This formidable body is implanted with vicious blades, hydraulic pistons and mechanized articulations, turning it into a walking siege weapon even as the subjects mind is erased through the combined assault of drugs, pain and painstaking surgical grafts. The result is an unthinking automaton that exists only to obey the Scholae's directives.

But what monster, what horror, could have forced the Scholae to plum these monstrous depths?
The answer is simple: human curiosity.

Early in his career Platon, founder of the Scholae, caught a glimpse of the power that human ingenuity could unleash and shuddered at the thought of its existence. Humanities ingenuity, naivete and greed are fated to combine and unleash forces no sane man would want to exist, before one even factors the presence of an inimical god of death.
And so, the Inquisition was born. Not to hunt witches and devil summoners. Not to hunt diabolists and deurgists who would threaten mankind with their shortsightedness, but to hunt down the best and brightest of mankind thus ensuring that their unwitting contributions did not

doom mankind to extinction. Its inquisitors work openly in the City States themselves, their hulking presence in the academic City States a constant reminder of who holds the reins. Outside the city states, Inquisitors are paired with an Eidolon to form an autonomous Quad, which works to track down, identify and neutralize inventors and technological developments that the Scholae considers too dangerous to be allowed to operate.

The sheer scope, ambition and audacity of this work would beggar belief and induce most sane men to scoff at the mere notion it could be true. This simple fact shields the Scholae's work from the eyes of the masses better than any amount of subterfuge or bribery ever could. It's work has continued for centuries, its methods and targets growing increasingly refined as the Scholae learn to target those innovations which would bring about revolutionary change and threaten the status quo, while allowing smaller increases in efficiency to go through so that the burgeoning population of the human realms might endure.

In recent years, though, there has been a marked shift in the focus of the efforts of the Inquisition: shifting from murder and coercion to kidnapping and recruitment. The Scholae, it seems, have struck upon a new plan. Aware that all they could do with their original strategies was delay the inevitable, they have now embarked upon a Great Work, a project they hope will allow them to subvert not just the development of technology across the world of Eä, but the very principles it is based upon.

The City States of Tauria: To live is to seek adventure, and to seek adventure is to experience glorious combat – that is the decree of Minos, Tauria's warrior king and patron god. Minos is the bull-spirited god of adventure and combat, ever seeking glory by battering his enemies and celebrating his victories through bombastic revelries. For Minos, questing and warfare are not to be looked at through the excruciatingly dull lens of practicality; instead, they are affairs worthy of ceremony and merriment, for a good fight or a perilous adventure are divine food for the soul. As such, Minos' personality is a multi-faceted beast in its own right. On the one hand, he can be merry and boastful, spontaneous and ready to make allowance. On the other, he is known to be temperamental and vengeful, often criticized as being shallow and unyielding when some unseen line has been crossed. While such mood swings can appear petty and juvenile to the uninitiated, the faithful of Tauria understand and embrace that duality as part of their god's passion and zest for life – pointing at the might and splendor of their own city to offer evidence.

Should one walk the streets of Tauria for the first time, one would think they lucked upon a holiday. The streets are perpetually abuzz with rambunctious melodies, the clattering of chalices, and the thunderous boasts of veteran warriors, swimming in a sea of colorful statues and murals, alongside effigies of bull-horns and Minos' weapon of choice, the double-sided axe. To propagate such elevated spirits, a part of Minos' clergy, known as Rhapsodoi, act as bards and storytellers of immense skill – sharing tales of epic proportions to stoke the lust for glory and adventure across the City State. The temple of this priesthood, and the center of such

sacred sagas and recollections, are the **Halls of Revelry**: this vast gallery houses a truly immense feasting table, running across the entire length of the building and filled with potent alcohol and mouthwatering foodstuffs. Minos' faithful fighters flock to the great hall in droves, feasting while listening to magnificent tales of their city's greatest warriors – drawing divine inspiration before they eventually depart to fight in the bull god's name. Visitors are allowed in the Halls and are sometimes even invited to the table, while the Rhapsodoi accept donations, readily offering their gratitude in the form of information about challenges and chances for warriors to prove themselves. It should come as no surprise that Minotaurs are ever welcome in the Halls, offered shelter and sustenance if needed – before they are sent to the acropolis of Kefala.

While the city's center of trade and culture lives in a festive atmosphere that leaks to neighboring districts, the city's expansive acropolis tells another tale. Set atop the fortified Kefala plateau and dominating the city's landscape, it houses the Kathapsis, the god's holiest of holies, where Minos' own arms and armor rest. While the city's civilians and veterans revel below, the Kefala houses the god's training grounds. Here, faithful of the bull god come to hone their warrior skills, both as individuals and as soldiers. Little is colorful about the soldiers' training, with discipline, efficiency and coordination valued greatly; and punishments, exacted by the god's other part of the clergy, the Kerasforoi, are harsh for those who fail to follow mandates or break formation. At the same time, however, each soldier is individually trained in any style of combat they prefer, often choosing techniques that lean towards spectacle and flamboyancy. While the two seem conflicting, with the efficiency of the method challenged by doubters, the God's aim is simple: he wants brutal and efficient armies, manned by soldiers who can excel individually and break the spirit of the enemy, while rallying their allies behind heroic deeds.

The pinnacle of individual training is reached in the **Pantaurion**, the gateway to the acropolis and Tauria's grand arena, which acts as a gathering nexus for most of the city's warriors. Such events are frequent and bloody, attracting warriors from all walks of life – both human and Bred – and forging combatants without equal. The events that take place within Minos' sacred arena are many, ranging from tense duels to the death, vicious assaults between minor gladiatorial armies, bestial attacks, cavalry skirmishes, and many other such showcases of battle-centric prowess.

The most famous event that takes place in the arena is the **Labor of Minos** – a survival challenge that is of the utmost importance to the bull god. During said trial, the main fighting platform is withdrawn to reveal a sprawling maze, digging deep within the Kefala hill underneath, and several contestants are hoisted into its center while blindfolded. When completely lowered, the trial-takers remove their coverings and are released from their harnesses: their goal is to exit the maze by following the many clues that are strewn throughout its winding corridors. Alongside the maze-trotters, two monstrous bulls are unleashed into the maze from its edges, seeking to trample all competitors they come across into a meaty pulp. Such bulls are specially bred and act as avatars of the deity's earthy presence. Each bull stands at twice the height of an

average man and is four times as wide – while being unnaturally muscled and having hides that are said to have the hardness of metal. Additionally, the maze itself is filled with traps and is able to mechanically alter certain paths and corridors – making the ordeal that much more challenging. Those that survive the Labor of Minos, gain the right to touch the god's armaments in the Kathapsis and, it is said, are visited by the bull god himself, forever gaining his divine protection.

In terms of leadership, the city is ruled by its God and his clergy – at least in principle. In practice, Tauria is led by a largely ecclesiastical oligarchy, who rule along with a select council of elders and individuals of note that represent the major factions that make up Tauria's infrastructure, including wealthy merchants, and military leaders of note. Tauria rarely turns its attention towards the other major City States – unless, of course, Minos takes offense at something… Instead, the city favors expansionist policies towards the west and north. With the tales of war against the Telian Empire and the Free Cities of the Alerian Plains still echoing proudly in the Halls of Revelry, Tauria continues to reach beyond its borders whenever the opportunity arises. Today, the colony and fortress city of Boubalia is positioned close to the borders between the City States Peninsula and the Allerian Plains, acting as the spearhead of the bull god's maneuvers in the west. Such plans, however, have been severely hampered as of late, due to the recent arrival of the Sorcerer Kings in the region, with the subsequent founding of their settlement of Taj'Khinjaha dragging valuable land and trade further away from Tauria's grip. The most striking example of Tauria's daring bravado and expansionism is the colony of Abydos: located at the southern portion of the Weaver Courts, the heavily fortified settlement is the only known example of foreign occupation near the enigmatic region. Lastly, the island of Kammeni, where once the grand city of Feera stood, and the town of Voupolis, openly serve as Tauria's vassals, brought to heel in centuries past, after offending the bull god – yet rumors whisper that the two cities are working in secret towards a joint rebellion. Tauria's unfettered and unapologetic diplomatic approach has granted it multiple enemies – including other City States and powers from within the Hundred Kingdoms. On the surface, Minos seems unaffected and unconcerned. However, this is not all that is encompassed within the Bull God's sphere of influence, for Minos is a passionate god, with a drive for might and glory that reaches into the farthest and most remote corners of Eä.

8. The Sorcerer Kings

Introduction

Far to the south and east of the lands of the Hundred Kingdoms and the City States lie lands that exist on no map known to mankind, even the wide-ranging exploration fleets of the Old Dominion, for they quite simply did not exist at that time.

These are the lands of the last successors to the legacy of the Old Dominion; they are the cabal of Sorcerer Kings who transcended the limits of mortal magic by binding themselves to the

Incarnate Souls of Balance, the Primordial Elemental Lords, and channeled their awesome primordial power to bring down their mad God, Hazlia, and usher the Fall.

Fleeing the destruction of Capitas across a chain of volcanic islands they raised, they were ultimately forced to bind the last of these islands into an entire continent their burgeoning power allowed them to raise from the very seafloor. Barren and desolate, the four surviving Sorcerer Kings: Erme, Who moves the Oceans, Dyelin, Pyre of Gods and Men, Hormus, Who Lays Mountains Low and Alessa, Weaver of Winds and Fates, gazed upon it and called it good.

They settled upon this new land and founded their realms, bonding their mortal servants to their elemental counterparts, seeking thus to guide their newborn elemental children in the gargantuan task of turning the desolate new continent into one capable of supporting life.

Feeling the call of the power and responsibilities they had suddenly assumed would soon call them away, they established a formal hierarchy among their servants, tasking each of them with a separate task in bringing forth the bounty of this new land.

The Elemental Courts thus established, the Sorcerer Kings then withdrew to master the awesome powers and responsibilities they had inherited with their primordial mantle turning their attention to stabilizing the continent they had raised and the weather phenomena that the Fall had unleashed only to find their efforts hampered by unexpected primordial foes. Quickly drawn into an escalating conflict beyond the sight and understanding of their mortal followers, the elder Sorcerer Kings abdicated their titles to the most powerful and competent of their followers, tasking them with seeing their appointed task to completion. Without the guidance and authority of the elder Sorcerer Kings, these hierarchies soon burgeoned in complexity and size as the sheer scope of the monumental task overwhelmed the nascent Elemental Courts. Old ranks were dusted, and new titles were invented to catalog, organize and structure the expanding bureaucracy. The ancient titles of Sultan, Vizier, and Emir rose to share space with Dukes, Marquises, Marechals, and Barons. Countless rank systems were created amongst their servants and followers giving rise to the Marids, the Djinn, the Efreet, and the Rakshasa just to name a few.

The Courts initially cooperated in the creation of Enclaves where the mortal servants and families of the Courts were to be settled. Though of lesser status than the Courts, these Enclaves were granted every need they might have with abundant mineral resources, clean water, temperate weather, and lesser elemental assistance and have thrived to become paradisiacal metropolises that surpass any upon the old continent.

The cleverest, most gifted, and most beautiful of their numbers would ascend to the Elemental Courts in elaborate ceremonies upon which riches and largesse were bestowed upon their families. These gifts and bounty earned the Courts the undying gratitude of the Enclaves, which in time would morph into outright worship, further twisting the fabric of an already strained system.

In time, a large population of refugees followed the first Exodus to this new continent. These hardy survivors crossed the raging oceans and a steaming archipelago with no assistance but the final blessing of the Goddess Ninuah, who sent her chosen servants and what wildlife remained in a final migration in a desperate attempt to safeguard the remaining trapped population of Capitas and its environs.

Unplanned and unaccounted for, these Tribes were barred from accessing the bounty of the Elemental Courts and Enclaves for both of these were more interested in promoting each other and themselves than accounting for the needs of unexpected visitors. Claiming they were never part of the Elders' plan, the Elemental Courts took no further action other than to destroy the archipelago that had allowed these survivors to reach them in the first place. The Enclaves quickly closed their gates and walled their farms, excluding the Tribes from the wealth that had been bestowed upon them.

Rejected by the servants of the Sorcerer Kings, these Tribes rejected them in turn, turning to the worship of Ninuah, whose final, fading blessing ensured that they not only survived on the barren lands of the new continent but slowly thrived. Adopting the life of nomads and ranging the vast sem- barren flats of the new continents, these tribes came to depend on their herds almost entirely. As the Long Winter eased and the capricious courts ever so begrudgingly fulfilled their mandated role and brought life to the plains, their numbers began to swell. As the seasons turned, their numbers grew until their population pressure pushed them into the fertile but guarded lands of the Enclaves.

The relentless conflict between the idyllic Enclaves and the now heretical tribes would ultimately draw in the mighty Elemental Courts, setting the stage for a massive confrontation that would awaken the Elder Kings and shift the balance of power in these new lands forever, setting them on a course to collide with the civilizations of the old continent after centuries of isolation.

The Sorcerer Kings will be a powerful mobile force with strong ranged and magic elements. Magic will clearly play a big role in the army, either as terrifying bound monsters under control of the Elemental Courts or more directly through spells. Magi will need to be carefully protected and the speed and power of the army will come at a cost, making this one of the most elite armies in the game, needing to balance the offensive output of the army against protecting the critical spellcasters.

Sub-Factions

The Enclaves: It is perhaps difficult to fathom the level of comfort and luxury the Enclaves enjoy without understanding that due to the patronage of the Elemental Courts, the elements themselves work in their favor. In the cities the heat of summer and the stench of so many bodies crammed together are wafted away by cool breezes that never let up. Their farmers are blessed with perfect rain patterns and rich soil upon which to till their fields while the rivers

never flood, but gently irrigate the fields next to which they meander. Fire has been completely tamed and their forges can run day and night, producing some of the cleanest alloys and finest steels mankind has ever seen. This has allowed their craftsmen and scholars an unparalleled amount of freedom to perfect their craft, resulting in some of the most beautiful works of art and architecture in the world, while their libraries, relics salvaged from the last days of the Old Dominion, have continued to grow, and prosper.

This affluence, though, has a price. The population of the Enclaves exists purely to serve the needs of the Sorcerer Kings. The laborers exist to fuel the craftsmen and scholars, who in turn exist only to provide the Sorcerer Kings with new potential recruits. While the Gift does not distinguish between vocations or heritage (much to the chagrin of more than a few enterprising Sorcerers) so if a higher percentage of the population is educated, then a higher percentage of those who awaken their Gift will be educated, shortening the training period for an aspiring Sorcerer significantly. If a child is shown to possess the Gift, they are to be immediately presented to the local Raj who will reward their family for the loss of their child as they embarks on the long journey to the Trophaeum Peak, where the Elemental Courts meet, to decide their fate. There, depending on their Gift and inclination, they might be apprenticed to a Sorcerer of one of the Elemental Courts and begin their journey into the Domains or, should their Gift be judged weak, relegated to the role of servant for their betters.

Every aspect of the Enclaves exists only to further the interests of the Sorcerer Kings, its population subject to the changing needs of their distant overlords. Until recently this was scarcely felt beyond the occasional loss of a favored child as their Gift awakened, but as the gaze of the Sorcerer Kings turns to the fertile lands of Alektria and beyond, the needs for manpower and servants for the expeditions is rising, pressuring a population long accustomed to comfort and plenty. Whereas in other societies one could chose to leave, the lands that surround the Enclaves are blasted and barren places, where only the destitute, the exiled and the Tribes roam, giving the poor population of the Enclaves little choice but to follow the whims of their masters. The notion of rebellion can scarcely be countenanced when the entire population and way of living depends on the largesse of the courts, and that is before one even considers the ever-present gaze of the Rjakur regiments, recruited from exactly those desperados and hardened survivors who roam the wasteland outside the Enclaves. Brought in from the deadly badlands that surround their Enclaves into a life of plenty these men are trained, conditioned, and indoctrinated by the Raj and his Sardar commanders until their loyalty is beyond question.

Centuries of isolation have made the population of the Enclaves, and the world, forget their true purpose: to provide what the Sorcerer Kings need to establish Dominion once more over the known world.

The Elemental Courts: At the very center of the Sorcerer Kings' continent, the Jaadoghar Kajhaana, lies the Trophaeum Pinnacle, once a modest island in an archipelago, but now a testament to the raw elemental power the Sorcerer Kings unleashed when they raised the entire continental shelf to provide themselves with a kingdom. Within this volcano lie the four

thrones of the Sorcerer Kings themselves: Erme, Who moves the Oceans, Dyelin, Pyre of Gods and Men, Hormus, Who Lays Mountains Low and Alessa, Weaver of Winds and Fates. Despite its awesome size and mind-boggling effort that went into making this mountain a monument worthy of their saviors, the Trophaeum Pinnacle lies mostly empty, its role remaining a more monumental and ceremonial focus to the Sorcerer Kings and their ambitions: to plumb the depths of sorcerous knowledge and climb the heights of power.

The four Elemental Courts are geographically and politically scattered across the realms of the Sorcerer Kings. Erme, Who moves Oceans, holds court from the beautiful garden palace in Jeel Sangar, in the northern Archipelago. Her lands are small and mountainous but what surface there is, is covered in a riotous burst of life and vegetation. Dyelin, Pyre of Gods and Men, resides in the forbidding fortress of Jalaag. The desolate lands he oversees teem with minerals and hide valleys so fertile they can feed his Enclaves with production to spare. Hormus, Who lays mountains Low, rules his burgeoning kingdom from the imposing stepped palace of Adharnev. His lands are the most expansive, his fields the most fertile and his Enclaves the most populous. Alessa, Weaver of Winds and Fates, tore one of Hazlia's palaces from the sky itself and holds court within the floating fastness of Hava Mahal. She does not supervise any Enclaves directly, but rather wanders the whole of Jadoghar Kajhaana, aiding where she is welcome, meddling where she is not, but seeking to promote the fortunes of the Sorcerer Kings overall.

From the teeming activity and sheer number of resources that flow into and from each of these Elemental Courts, one could perhaps expect them to be teeming with powerful Sorcerers and mighty Maharajahs pursuing campaigns of learning and conquest that would beggar minor kingdoms. This is not the case; not because the Sorcerers are not busy with exactly the kind of mighty Sorcerous pursuit one would imagine these puissant casters to be engaged with, but simply because they are not *there*.

The greatest secret and power of the Sorcerer Kings is the discovery that while the domain of Balance is the physical world we all inhabit, the slumbering primordial is so powerful that each of its four constituent souls have *Domains* of their own which underpin our existence. Mortals could not hope to access or even see these outlandish realms if it were not for the intercession of the Sorcerer Kings themselves who bind their most powerful apprentices to the denizens of these Elemental Domains, allowing mortals to set foot within these primordial realms.

The power, knowledge and prestige of any Sorcerer is determined by how deeply they have delved into the Elemental Domains, what secrets they have thus uncovered, what denizens they have bound and what resources they have exploited. So, Sorcerers must devote the vast majority of their time to exploration and exploitation of this uncharted frontier, becoming more powerful in the process.

It is the secret, most ambitious, dream of the Sorcerer Kings to finally plumb the true depths of the Elemental Domains and master their powers, in order to one day bring down the barriers separating the Prime Domain and its Elemental mirrors. This would allow the Sorcerer Kings to

awaken balance and rule all of existence, wielding their unmatched elemental powers as the Primordial's stewards and protectors.

Spotlight

The Settlement of Taj'Khinjaha: Founded in the Allerian Plains, at the very apex of the great oceanic Horn of Thrapsalon, the budding port of Taj'Khinjaha is the first settlement of the Sorcerer Kings to be founded on the continent of Alektria – signaling their arrival after centuries of absence since the events of the Fall. Serving the Court of Fire and ruling in its name, the city's founder and current governor – Jahan the Shimmering Vizier – originally purchased the deeds to the lands his city was built upon through the City State of Helias, acquiring such a valuable asset through the infamous counting house of House Mydas. The paid for land possessed an ample underground freshwater spring, along with considerable mineral wealth contained within the nearby hills. Though purchased with vast quantities of gold and seen as legitimate by those City States still adhering to the rules of their Scholaes, Jahan's land was nonetheless claimed by another major power, the warlike City State of Tauria. Regardless, fate would see the Vizier arrive to the Allerian Plains with the help of Theogoni – successor to the deceased City States captain Rysalektos – bringing with him a privateer fleet capable of forging a new foothold on Alektria's shores. Though successful, Taj'Khinjaha's founding would mark the beginning of hostilities between the Sorcerer Kings and Tauria, sparking the discontent that would lead to the continued diplomatic decline between the two great powers.

The reason behind Tauria's claim over Taj'Khinjaha's location is bound to trade, as the area acted as a key transport route for the streams of profitable trade that spilled in from the lands of the Hundred Kingdoms and made their way into the City States Peninsula and Tauria herself. Though ladened with luxury goods and a plethora of precious materials, such trade routes carry a far more critical resource within their winding caravans – grain. As it currently stands, whoever controls Taj'Khinjaha – along with its attached territories in the greater Allerian Plains and the mercantile traffic that passes through them – controls the flow of trade across the broader region, elevating the seemingly unimportant settlement and its master to all new heights of importance and prestige. However, Tauria has never been known for its reserved nature, and the followers of the bull-god Minos declared war upon the Vizier not too long after his arrival, leading to various minor battles and clashes that chipped away at both powers.

From the great river Pnigmon to the Allerian Plains themselves, skirmishes became all too common as the clash for control over Taj'Khinjaha began to creep up in intensity. Momentary peace was achieved with Tauria when Jahan bargained for an end to the hostilities, offering for trade to resume towards the City State without any additional taxation from the great Vizier. Additionally, Jahan promised to finance the construction of infrastructure that would support all trade routes making their way towards Tauria, promising to build roads and bridges that would make the City States Peninsula more accessible to those arriving from the Allerian Plains. However, such peace proved to be unsustainable, as the denizens of Tauria found themselves

without their much-needed trade routes, as almost none of the great caravans arrived before the gates of their city. Lured in by profit and the promise of more coin, most of the traders arriving from the north would elect not to travel beyond Taj'Khinjaha, for the city was wealthy and would pay more for their goods and services than Tauria ever could. Such sour trade prospects have created an ever-expanding tension between the sorcerous city and Tauria, with hostilities and brief stretches of tenuous peace having now become commonplace, overshadowed by the prospect of all-out war that looms on the horizon.

Despite its tumultuous beginnings, the city of Taj'Khinjaha is a true wonder to behold, being still a relatively new settlement but expanding at a tremendous rate. Its great port is always filled with a plethora of moored ships, some arriving from truly distant and exotic lands. Vessels belonging to the Nords, Sorcerer Kings, City States, Hundred Kingdoms, and cultures from seas unknown can be found in Taj'Khinjaha's populous port, all seeking to partake in the flow of wealth that runs through the city like a cascading river. Even those of the elder races have made their way to the Vizier's domain, with Dweghom exiles and Spire Merchant Princes finding a suitable purchase within the cultural melting pot that has been infused with the city's beating heart. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, the city has acted as the vessel for a tentative diplomatic alliance between the courts of Fire and Air, with the latter sending over military aid to support Taj'Khinjaha and its governor Jahan – including Skypiercer Yindak, a renowned and thunderous warrior of considerable skill.

The city's streets and boundaries expand with each passing day, stretched out by the frames of forming buildings and the billowing outlines of tent complexes, all meant to accommodate the settlement's ever-increasing population. Such construction is greatly hastened through the use of labor-driven elementals, with earth and water elementals – imported as laborers from their perspective courts – working alongside those of fire and air to support the city's need for growth. Fire elementals feed the city's furnaces and illuminate its winding streets; earth elementals part soil and rock alike to make room for further infrastructure; water elementals feed Taj'Khinjaha's waterworks, providing the city with clean and drinkable water; and air elementals blow and howl constantly, taming the dust-clouds that rise from arriving caravans and soothing the city with a near-constant breeze. Those elementals that displease the settlement's ruler, mostly those of the earth and water variety, are condemned to maintain and labor within Taj'Khinjaha's advanced sewer system, forced to linger within mounds of human filth as punishment.

At the center of Taj'Khinjaha sits the Vizier's grand palace, crowned by a sky-reaching tower that has yet to see completion and surrounded by scaffolding and shuffling laborers, the palace – much like the rest of the city – is unfinished. Most strikingly, swirling above Jahan's intimidating abode, a giant magical pyre burns without end, fueled by numerous flame-bound elementals and draping the buildings below with an otherworldly, orange glow. Though the city has yet to reach its final form – ever-growing in its nascent state – its mark on the world has nonetheless been significant. Gripped by the machinations of a mysterious and ambitious master, blessed

with great wealth, and contested by powerful rivals, the future of Taj'Khinjaha remains uncertain still…